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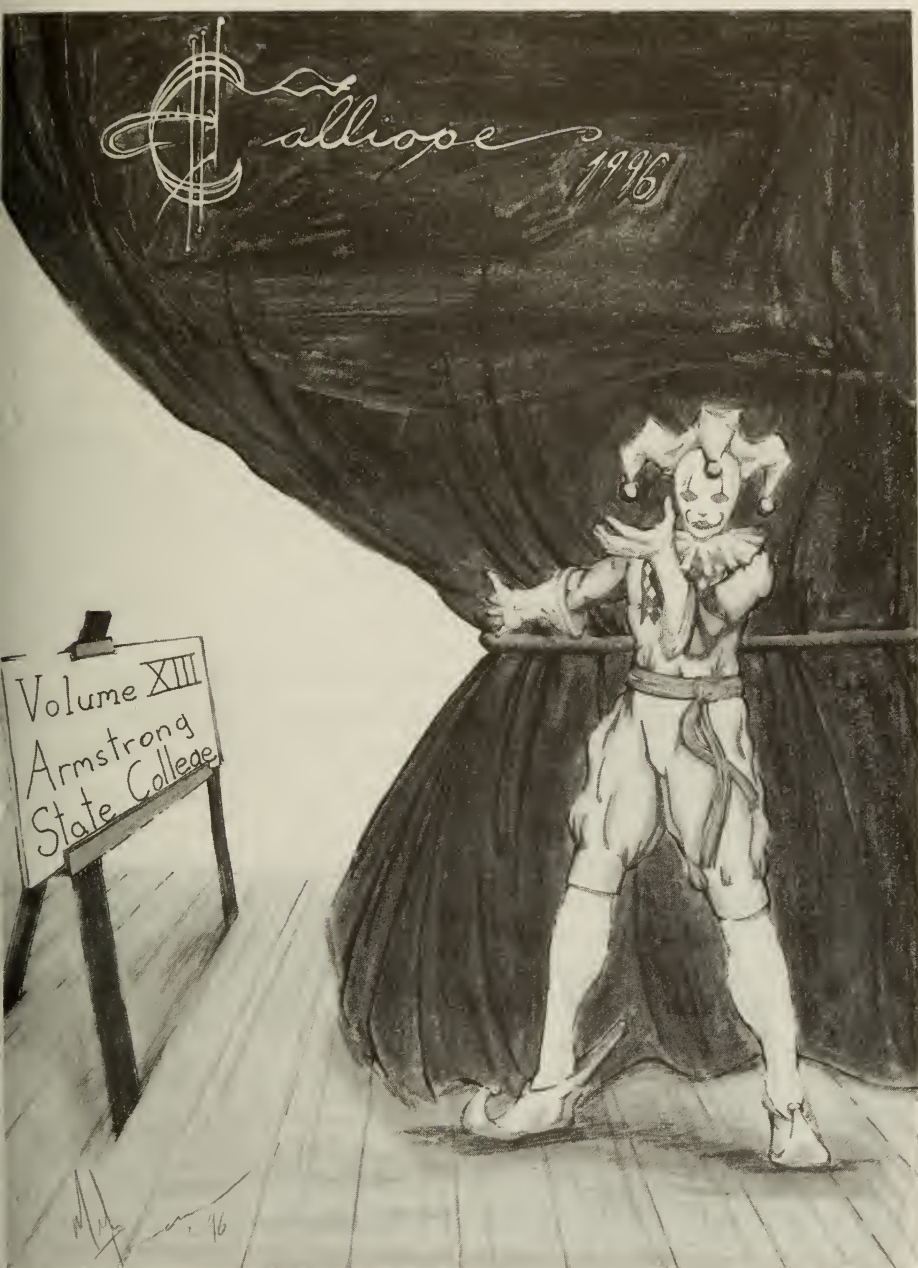
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The Jester
Micheal Torrance

Calliope

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Calliope is published annually in the Spring by and for the students of Armstrong State College. Editors give student works first priority, but also accept submissions by faculty and staff. Consideration is given to work done in all disciplines.

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The faculty advisor selects the *Lillian Spencer Award* for best poem and best prose piece.

Mr. Tom Cato, of the Fine Arts Department, chose the *Lillian Spencer Award* for best artwork.

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Cover design and additional artwork: Micheal Torrance

Contents

Poetry

Black Roses Eric Filmer	9
My Silver Panther Treva Fitzgerald	22
Pot of Jonquils Rachel Brown	25
To Finish Where Poe Left Off Kenneth Johnson	32
The Calling Tiffanie L.C. Rogers	61
Sleeping With a Mockingbird Donna Ferrence	63
Autobiography Michael Williams	70
Deities' Debate Billy Parker	72
These Four Walls Michelle Ortiz	83
National Geographic Rachel Brown	88
E'la Jim Sheehan	102

Prose

Jumping Daphne Bazemore	6
*Tough Guy David Starnes	11
Straight Jackets David Marshall	27
Just Desserts Freya Roseane Poller	33
Patty's Coming Mary O'Sako	44
A Sense of Family Danielle Argenti	64
Forever Mary O'Sako	74
Trash: A Lesson in Seduction Billy Parker	85
The Spring Julie Barfield	89

Artwork

The Jester	Micheal Torrance	1
The Ultimate Ecstasy	Setona Page	5
Solitude	Stefano Magliulo	10
Monolith	Des Purcell	21
Catgirl	Renee Hill	23
Sunset Boulevard	Des Purcell	24
Wind Blown Ivy with Watermelon Shirt		
	Phillip Kandel	26
Shades	Julie B. Hodge	31
Childhood Dreams	Renee Hill	32
Obsessive Compulsive	Karen Gwinner	43
Helena	Jennifer L. Cohen	44
*Cory on The Tracks	Des Purcell	60
Momma's Passion	Vickie Williams	68
Eagle	Robert Bell	69
Marianne II	Setona Page	71
Mating	Christopher Daly	84
Loneliness	Nick Bacich	87
Dawn's Dew	Vickie Williams	101
Cloud Study #46	Setona Page	103

Color Plates

Self-Portrait as Van Gogh	Renee Hill
Elle	Eva Martha Madsen
Sun and Moon Tree Batik	Dianna Ulm
Time Flying	Phillip Kandel

* Indicates *Lillian Spencer Award*



The Ultimate Ecstasy

Setona Page

Jumping

Daphne Bazemore

It had stood for years unnumbered, vast and alone, to span the broad river. Though made of gray concrete, it had always been known as Steel Bridge. Surrounded by thick, obscenely green bushes, the bridge was the jumping-off point for adulthood. Every summer since its creation, the graduating teenagers from the local high school would gather to swim and sun and fish. And jump.

Lloyd stood bouncing lightly on his toes, waiting his turn. Heady from the reflection of the sun off the muddy brown water, he looked down toward the south end of the bridge, the place where the cops would first appear when they discovered that today was the day for jumping. Roger Waters caught him looking and smiled nastily. "Scared, Benton?" he sneered.

"Bite me, Waters. I'm just looking at the sky."

"Yeah? I bet you wish the cops would come so you wouldn't have to jump. You gonna pee your drawers when you hit the water, Benton?"

"Get lost, Roger. I don't need you to make sure I don't chicken out. I'm gonna jump, same as everyone else."

"Sure thing. Just remember I'll be happy to give you that little extra push if you need it." With that Roger walked farther down the line to hassle someone else. Lloyd released the breath he'd pent up in his mouth and slowly exhaled.

He looked up at the perfect blue sky and wondered why it wouldn't start raining. Hard. He thought about what it would be like, jumping out into nothing, praying he wouldn't hit the bottom and get stuck and drown. Praying that his shorts wouldn't fly off when he hit the water. Praying he didn't scream too much like a girl. Just praying that he wouldn't do anything to embarrass himself.

The whole class knew he was afraid of heights. He'd proved that conclusively on the physics trip when he'd passed

out on the roller coaster. Lydia Rollins, his lab and ride partner, had slapped him frantically, screaming for them to stop the frigging ride 'cause he was gonna fall out or something. He'd come to just as the ride started down and had promptly puked into Lydia's blouse. At the end of the ride he had been rewarded for his outstanding performance with a handful of wet napkins and a new lab partner.

Now they expected him to jump off a bridge. Fat chance. He'd probably puke on the way down and fall right into his own vomit. He was suddenly doubly glad he'd skipped breakfast.

Looking at the line, he realized that many of the students who had formerly been in front of him had somehow moved behind him while he was daydreaming. It was to be a crucifixion then. He was to be their entertainment.

For a brief moment he considered walking away, citing appendicitis. But he knew instantly from their hungry faces that they would never allow it. One way or another, he was going off that bridge. It struck him suddenly that this same thing probably happened every year. Some poor, sad sack, the class punching bag, would be bullied off the bridge, much to the delight of his fellow students. He wondered if his father had gone willingly, bravely. He decided his father had probably been the first one to jump, doing three back flips on his way down, his lawnmower-grill grin never wavering.

There wasn't too much talking as Lloyd Benton stepped up onto the concrete railing. Mostly everyone just watched, their eyes wide, their mouths half-smiling, ready to roar if he should wet his pants or, God forbid, shit them. Ready with the catcalls, if he should step down. Lloyd knew it. From the moment his feet left the concrete, he would never be able to say, "Sorry, guys, I just can't do it. You see, my father, that paragon of virtue, used to take me with him on roofing jobs when I was a kid. One day I fell off and he never bothered to come see if I was okay. He just hollered for me to get my clumsy ass back up there and bring him a beer while I was at it. And so, no. I'm very sorry to spoil your fun, but no, I just

can't do it. I'm afraid that if I do, this time there won't be any getting back up there because I'll be dead. Of fright."

Lloyd clenched his fists and looked back at them, at their hungry faces, their eager eyes. He thought of his father. He realized that if his father were here now he would be part of that crowd, ready to push him if it was necessary. His father would have had no mercy. And neither would his classmates.

He suddenly thought about the bushes under the bridge, how they had become a make-out spot for teenagers over the years. He wondered how many children had been conceived there, if he had been. He decided that it was a large probability and that it explained a lot about his father.

His father hated him because he felt that Lloyd had stolen his life.

Lloyd looked up at the sky again marveling at its blue perfection.

On the way down he told his father that he had never loved him anyway.





Self Portrait as Van Gogh
Renee Hill

Black Roses

Open windows let in no air
or light, the sun has died.
Instead I shall light candles,
placing them upon the table
amidst empty plates
amidst silverware
amidst the dust.
Settings for a feast
to which only I arrived.
Is it too early to pour the wine?
What goes with nothing, white or red?
The stillness begins to unnerve
as it always has;
it has always been here.
I shall finally break the silence
Playing music in the ballroom
An old phonograph scratching out old melodies
Echoing throughout the chambers,
Haunting this place.
I can still waltz.
Swirling around bouquets of black roses
in the waning candlelight
taking into my arms
spirits of the memories
of what never occurred.

Eric Filmer



Solitude

Stefano Magliulo

Tough Guy

David Starnes

Before he lost his legs, Jonas Lawrence was a regular at the snooker table in the back room of Cleo's place. He never looked up from a game, never regarded me at any neighboring pool tables, never responded to my habit of sinking the cue ball, missing the eight ball, or losing most of the time. I was just another college student. I never understood the physics of snooker, the kiss of red against red, but I liked the way he glided around the table as if he were on wheels. He moved with grace and deliberation and leaned into a shot as if he were aiming a rifle. One eye was almost sealed shut into a permanent wink, and the good one matched the blue of the chalk. Between turns he drew from a pack of Camels. He rarely spoke, except to comment on his opponent's shot, and even then it was a growl of neither praise nor sympathy, but like the tentative bark a dog might make at some sudden motion. Sometimes his rasp resembled a laugh, and a dozen crooked teeth surrendered to the occasion. But otherwise his mouth seemed to have arrived at a bad taste and settled there. When he wasn't wielding a pool stick, he sat near the card table, not playing, but watching as he smoked, or smoking as he read from a shelf of paperbacks, or reading with a cup of black coffee in his hand. The books he held were usually westerns by Max Brand or Luke Short, but once I saw him with a dog-eared Pocket Book of Verse. Mr. Lawrence wore dark shirts with snaps instead of buttons, dark slacks, and beat-up moccasins over dark socks. He combed his white hair straight back. He looked like an older, more brawny version of Hopalong Cassidy.

It was my first year of college in the mill town of Port Angeles and my second attempt at student life in general. I had tried the university right out of high school in Seattle, but dropped out after a semester, not prepared for the tallness of the world. I remained at home, helping out at my father's lumber business.

My father had been in the navy. We had moved around a lot when I was growing up, coming and going in the middle of a school year, breaking up the leisure of a summer, adding an extra chill to a winter. At each school I would arrive either far ahead or far behind in my lessons. I was either catching up to the kids around me or getting bored as they caught up to me. By the time I graduated from Roosevelt High, I was intimidated by everything that breathed, by everyone who addressed me—from the mailman to the girl across the street, from my teacher to my own father. My social skills were like those of most people my age, I suppose, only worse. Yet, I wasn't interested in people my own age. I preferred the company of children or those much older. I thought there was more to learn from the extremes.

After a year of working for my father I moved to Port Angeles and enrolled in Peninsula, a small school in the hills above the town. The first year there I had roomed with three other boys, but I had grown weary of lights burning at all hours, of bathroom humor and humorless bathrooms, of stale beer, dead socks and underwear, and most wearisome of all, the pervasive topic of sex. Although I was older than the others, I had not yet experienced the act itself beyond a surplus of kisses. That summer I had stroked a single breast, one night in a lifeguard's chair at Alki Point. I had scaled a hill, while all about me the talk was of mountains--the air was thin with visions of Himalayan ecstasy.

A few days before fall classes began, I drove up from Seattle to find a new place to live. I had heard about a cheap rooming house that rented to students, as well as truckers, laborers and salesmen. It was an old two story house on the bluff overlooking the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and at night Vancouver Island displayed a bracelet of lights. The house was the faded red of a retired barn, and a patch of cornstalks took up half the back yard. I was drawn to its age, its humble construction.

When Jonas Lawrence answered my knock he filled the front door with the same imposing stance I had seen at Cleo's.

I expected him to be armed with a cue stick, but his hand gripped a paperback and obscured its cover, except for the head of a wild-eyed horse.

"Yeah," he rasped, not as a question, but as if in reply. The clear blue eye inspected me while the other seemed to resist looking at me. I addressed a scar that splintered a corner of his upper lip. I asked about a room and he led me through a parlor to the door of one that contained nothing more, nor could it have allowed more, than a bed, a chest of drawers, and a wardrobe closet.

"Fifty dollars a week," said Mr. Lawrence. "Share the kitchen. Bath down the hall."

"If it's no trouble," I began, standing before the tall world.

"No trouble," he said, raising a hand between us before he walked away. "Move in today."

I immediately settled into the worn and outworn quality of Mr. Lawrence's rooms. I warmed to the yellowed shades, the dust upon the drapes, the cabbage roses on the ancient wallpaper. And I warmed to my host and landlord. He was around seventy and as set in his ways as the linoleum path between our rooms and the hallway. I had been intimidated by his bulk and his direct one-eyed gaze, and yet I relinquished that intimidation once I absorbed the sounds and smells of his presence. I felt at home among the worn and outworn.

I still clung to the artifacts of my childhood—a baseball glove, picture books, a Lone Ranger lunch box—things I'd outgrown or played out. They were outdated but remained in the present. But I was taken by older things as well, the things beyond my birth: old clothes, old books, old records, old cars. I loved to prowl among thrift shops and second hand stores, responding to age and my ageless tastes. I wore clothes from another era, shirts and jackets that a man three times my age might have in his closet.

Mr. Lawrence mostly left me alone. We might not encounter each other for days at a time, as I left early for classes and he remained in bed, or one of us turned in before

the other returned home. Sometimes we sat down to a meal together, and one night a week we shared his whiskey.

I'd had a few beers before, and there had been alcohol in my family's house, but neither of my parents made much of a dent in any one bottle. The liquor usually surfaced at Thanksgiving, and gradually returned to a closet or cupboard with the last of the Christmas decorations. But Mr. Lawrence introduced me to it straight; Old Crow poured modestly into a glass until it diminished my own sense of modesty, and I voiced the opinions of a man of the world, without an original thought behind them. I soon discovered that not only was my landlord practically sightless in one eye, but nearly deaf in one ear. He sat drinking in profile at the kitchen table, with his weak eye and ear turned towards me. Occasionally he cupped a hand over the ear, straining to catch my low inflections. It would have been more agreeable to have switched places with him at the table, but it never seemed to have occurred to him. Besides the oilcloth was more faded at his chair. His arm had rested there a long time.

Mr. Lawrence had been in the merchant marines, had worked as a stevedore, a rodeo rider, an umpire in the minor leagues, and for the railroad. He was twice married and twice divorced and had lived in his red house for twenty-five years. After each splash of whiskey in our glasses he replaced the cap on the bottle, and after several splashes, his stories detoured into other stories. By then he ignored my empty glass and drank from the bottle, only to lower it again with an after-thought. The bottle approached his mouth a few more times in anticipation of the big sip. Then came his perpetual look of surprise when his mouth met the cap. But by that moment my chin was approaching my chest and I was off to bed, finding my way by a kind of braille consisting of wallpaper, plaster, and lamp shades.

On other nights I was awakened by the gruff exchanges between Mr. Lawrence and one of the roomers down the hall. Once he and a salesman I had never seen look sober tried to recite "The Walrus and the Carpenter," and Mr. Lawrence kept

repeating, "The time has come to speak of many things." Or the evening he and a meeker presence argued over who was older, and Mr. Lawrence claimed to be one hundred. I fell back asleep believing him.

The fall term passed by as quietly as the leaves of the sycamores and elms. I took a course in world literature, a speech class, and French. The theater department was doing Look Homeward, Angel, which was set in the early part of this century. There was a joke around campus that I had loaned out my wardrobe for the play.

In the thin air of November, when the leaves were at their most red and yellow, and the light of day was religiously serene, I fell in love with Leah Haven. She was in my speech class, where she had turned my head with her blushing diffidence and willful defiance; she giggled and she held her chin high. She had grown up fifteen miles away in Sequim. She was a violinist in the local orchestra and was majoring in German. She had dreams of continental breakfasts, first class railway compartments, and studying under some palsied baton in Vienna. She was sparrow-like with big feet. I called her Minnie Mouse. She called me Charlie Chaplin, because I went by Charles and she thought I walked like the tramp. By Halloween our kisses had all but welded our mouths together, and by the first frost we were ready for more. I lied and said that I had, too, at seventeen. "We were such babes," she said, her face half in mourning. Leah roomed with two other girls in the lower level of the home of the philosophy professor, Dr. Werner, and his wife. Our moments there alone were rare, and to spend the night was out of the question.

On a gray and damp Sunday Leah appeared at Mr. Lawrence's front door. Mr. Lawrence spent most Sundays at Cleo's, and I was glad to have the place to myself. Leah wore the trench coat I'd found in a thrift shop but was too small for me. She looked like a child pretending to be a spy.

"I had to get out of there. A bunch of guys came over and I couldn't hear myself think. I hope you don't mind me coming here. I would have called but—"

"No. That's fine. I'm glad. Sit. Please." I was nervous as a horse. It was the first time in my life that a girl had called on me. I pulled Mr. Lawrence's chair from the table. "Would you like some tea?"

"That would be nice. Yes, I would. Thank you."

Mr. Lawrence kept a kettle warm on the stove. I made a small pot and placed it on the table to steep. She warmed her hands on the pot as if it were a lamp. She eyed the kitchen, the parlor, the cracked linoleum, the loose wallpaper, the sunken sofa.

"So this is where you live," she said. "You like old things, don't you? Like the coat you gave me. And your old Charlie Chaplin pants. I figured you'd live in a place like this. I think it's nice."

"Well, it's pretty old, all right."

"So where's your old friend? Mister — I can't remember his name."

"Lawrence. He's probably down at Cleo's."

"Cleo's? That old tavern on Front Street?"

I poured each of us a cup of weak Earl Grey. "Well, it's a pool hall as well."

"A pretty old pool hall, if you ask me. Don't tell me you've been there. Well, of course you would have."

"Sure. That's how I met my landlord. Well, not exactly. I used to see him there a lot. I was kind of scared of him."

"Why scared?"

"I don't know. I thought he was some old tough guy, which I guess he is."

"Did you ever talk to him?"

"I was afraid to. But I was wrong. He doesn't bother anybody."

"Can we go there sometime?"

"To Cleo's? Sure. Do you like to shoot pool?"

She giggled, revealing the tip of her tongue and precise little teeth. "Maybe you can teach me."

"Ha. I'm not exactly Paul Newman. In fact, I'm not

very good at all."

"Oh really?" She held her cup high in both hands and peered at me through the handle, as if she were taking a picture. "What are you good at?"

Her expression had changed from the girl in speech class and the girl I had kissed until I was ready to crawl into her mouth. It was now the face of a woman I was just meeting. It was still Leah, but Leah with lines and colors I'd missed before. She stepped out of her coat, letting it fall to the chair, no longer a child pretending, now taller and fuller; in a minute she would rise to the ceiling like Alice.

"Where's your room?" she asked with an older voice.

I led her by the hand and closed the door and pulled the shade. The light in the room was the color of sleep. We did the rest in silence.

I don't know what time it was when Mr. Lawrence found us. I'd forgotten his habit of cracking the door to see if I was in, sometimes switching on the overhead light. I'd either pretend to be asleep or that his waking me had not been a bother. But when the room lit up and I had grown a second head, Mr. Lawrence froze, and even his bad eye seemed to register. The room went dark again and the door closed softly behind him.

Leah giggled under the covers, a girl again. "I think I've outstayed my welcome."

"No, don't leave yet." I held on to the newness of her, to the scent of pine and something metallic. "I have to tell you. I —"

"Yes. . ." She stretched the word out, lowering her voice, mocking authority.

"That was the first time for me. I couldn't tell you before."

She was silent but the room was not dark enough for me to miss her eyes when she moved her hand across them. We drifted back to sleep and woke again at dawn. We dressed and eased past Mr. Lawrence's closed door and through the parlor.

Leah's coat had been neatly hung on the back of the kitchen chair I used. We kissed at the front door before she withdrew into a white morning. It had snowed and I thought the whole world was a wedding.

On the day when the world was observing the anniversary of Pearl Harbor, Leah telephoned to say she had missed her period. She thought she had been safe with me, and now she was scared. She couldn't see me for awhile; she was going home to her family. The approaching holidays grew louder and more offensive. School was out for three weeks, but I felt no elation, no sense of release. I sought refuge with my own family, wishing to avoid the tall world again, but I returned to Port Angeles right after Christmas. My calls to Sequim had been curtly received by Leah's mother: "I'll give her the message."

Finally I drove to her home. A tree blinked off and on relaying back to itself in the center of a picture window. The front railing was draped with red velvet, and a giant candy cane was attached to the front door.

Leah's face showed no age at all. She greeted me with the same self-assurance, coupled with the same hesitancy I'd witnessed in speech class, when she had addressed thirty skeptical faces on "The Romantic Impulse of Johannes Brahms." Except for my face, which Leah had fixed upon by the end of her talk. But now I wished to discard my face, to shed it; I didn't know what else to do with it.

She thrust her eyes at me, dark and defiant, but I looked away from them. She asked to sit with me in my car. I kept my eyes on the street, where a few boys were testing out new bicycles. She spoke to my profile. I would just as soon she had met with a deaf ear and a closed eye.

"You see, it wasn't you at all, but someone I used to know. He called me the week before. There was no one at home, and it just. . .happened. I'm sorry. I didn't know how to tell you. But Charles. . .Charlie. . .that day, that night with you was so different. Oh, God, I'm ruining this." She started to cry

and I let her. "I couldn't talk to you. I was afraid. Like you used to be of Mr. Lawson."

"Lawrence." I turned toward her at last. "You were afraid of me? That's a laugh. I'm no tough guy."

"I know. It's because you're not tough. I couldn't hurt you like I'm hurting you now. You're too good for me."

In the late afternoon of the last day of the year I lay with my face to the wall. Mr. Lawrence knocked and opened the door. He spoke without looking at me, as he would at the table. "We might as well bend a few elbows," he said.

"There's nothing else to do around here."

I followed him into the kitchen where he had mixed up some eggnog. He offered me a glass cup and we toasted the new year. We were still toasting an hour later. We had run out of eggnog and had started in on the remaining bourbon. This time we both drank from the bottle.

"I was getting worried about you, Charles. Staying in your room. Staring at the ceiling all day. Not a good habit for a fellow to get into." He showed me his good eye which shone like a jewel. He lit a cigarette and passed the bottle across the table.

"I had a gentleman upstairs one year. Lost his wife. Blew his head off. You should have seen his face when I found him. You could see the disgust that made him put the gun in his mouth. Then the fear when he pulled the trigger. Then the shock when he fell back and saw his brains on the ceiling." He shook his head and reached for the bottle. "Damndest thing I've ever seen."

Out in the night the revelers were starting to broadcast with car horns and a few tentative firecrackers.

Mr. Lawrence held the bottle up to the light. "How do you like that?" he said. "We're all out of whiskey and cigarettes and women. Let's take a hike."

We got our coats. Mr. Lawrence started to turn out the kitchen light but then decided to leave it on. He spoke over his shoulder as we entered the hallway. "Makes it look like we're home when we get back." I closed the front door behind us and

we set out for the lights of the liquor store a few blocks away.

Mr. Lawrence was in the air before I had stepped from the curb. The kid never saw him in those dark clothes. The car tossed him onto the hood, and when the boy hit the brakes, Mr. Lawrence was thrown him back to the street and under the car.

While he was in the hospital I looked after the red house, showing rooms to prospective tenants, collecting rent, answering calls. I roamed about the space we had shared, which had grown musty without Mr. Lawrence's efforts at opening doors and windows. Now it was too cold. The oil heater brought memories of my childhood winters, ticking away with strange rooms, foreign faces and voices, the intimidation of new air. I strayed from studies and sat at the kitchen table, sometimes in the dark, sipping from a bottle of Old Crow I'd bought in Mr. Lawrence's absence. I heard his bark as he lost himself in a tall story. We had become easy friends, the easiest I had yet known. He told his stories and I listened. He asked me about school, about my family, and I had little to say, reluctant to raise my voice without a drink or two. I shrugged and he nodded. We wore our old clothes and were comfortable with the silence between us.

In a few weeks he was home, greeting a handful of visitors from a wheel chair in the parlor with the same offhand remark: "They took off my legs since I last saw you."

Mr. Lawrence's sister had flown up from Utah to be with him. I stayed with them until the end of spring when the school year was over. His sister had talked him into a rest home. Mr. Lawrence grumbled at first but gave in to the idea.

"Can't dance and it's too wet to plow," he told me on the day I left. We shook hands on the sidewalk, at the curb where he had been airborne. It was the first time we had touched each other. His hand was large and warm and had done it all. He held on to mine and closed. The old red house seemed to be fading as I stood over him. I moved back to Seattle. It's a tall city and I belonged there.



Monolith
Des Purcell

My Silver Panther

My silver panther
closes his warm amber eyes
to sleep during the noon day heat
so he can hunt during the night.
In his sleep, all tension escapes his body;
he purrs his way into sweet dreams
of successful hunts. He looks as innocent
as a newborn kitten--sweet, fresh, and cuddly. His heart
is open to your pain and fears. His friendship is a protector
from the storms that overtake the fields of my life.

When he awakes, he stretches; his muscles
move to a beautiful choreographed dance as light
and shadows play among the planes of his skin. He snuggles
closer to me fighting the urges of wakefulness. I can feel
his heartbeat and spirit grow as he slowly awakens.

But when he is awake, he is a hunter of the night.
He is most alive at night with the moonlight streaming and
glowing down on his silver hair. He moves with an ease of
self awareness. He moves in and out of the shadows of
the night on a prowl looking for a successful hunt. Watchful
eyes always aware of who and what is around him.

Beware of his amber eyes, for if you stare into them too long,
he mesmerizes and pulls you in for the taking. A faint glimmer
of playfulness always sparkles in his eyes. He is open one
minute to your affections and loving. I seize the moment to
hold and soothe him. His hair is short and stubbly,
but feels like silver satin to the eager fingertips. As I
massage his neck, he relaxes his defenses. For that brief
moment, I can feel his spirit. I feel his thoughts, pain,
frustrations, fears, passions, and loves. Suddenly, he pulls
away, leaving me shaking from all the intense sensations I
feel. With a blink of an eye, he is aloof and distant, but
always demanding my attention.

Treva Fitzgerald



Catgirl

Renee Hill



Sunset Boulevard
Des Purcell

A Pot of Jonquils

Each day he wears
a clean white shirt
his wife washes
and starches for him.

He keeps plotted photo
contracts in his briefcase.
He snaps the lock shut and
applies after-shave lotion.

Dressed in blue suit, he waves
to her, then travels
over bumpy, rural clay roads
visiting old widows.

This week the back of
his black automobile
is filled with pots of yellow
jonquils sitting side by side.

If each woman gives him
two names of close friends
(only widows will do),
he gives client a gift.

His fresh white shirt, dark
blue suit and after-
shave fragrance plus
boyish grin nail the sale.

When he shows Widow Jane
serene scene, she gives names,
signs on dotted line and gets
a pot of yellow jonquils.

The scene of measured plots,
green grass and shade trees,
is cemetery, where
I wait for widows to die.

Rachel Brown



Windblown Ivy with Watermelon Shirt
Phil Kandell



Elle
Eva Martha Madsen

Straight Jackets

David Marshall

The first time I actually heard “They’re Coming to Take Me Away,” I was in the University of Massachusetts Medical Center — psychiatric ward. We were eating breakfast. WIXV, the local classic rock station, was running a contest to see if anyone could identify it. I could (my sister used to hum it), but the nurses didn’t let me call. But that was okay. It gave me and Josh something to bitch about. We were both there for suicide attempts.

We always had to have something to bitch about. Not because there was really anything wrong, but because during the morning meeting the patients were supposed to bring up any problems so they might be discussed in a healthy manner. It was all part of becoming functional people — that’s what Lily, the head nurse, said.

We were eating breakfast when Dan walked in. We were all pretty surprised to see Dan out of his room. He was normally confined there because he would wander off.

“Good morning, Dan,” I said. “It’s good to see you out and about again.”

“Hi, God,” Dan said. Dan was psychotic.

“Are you joining us for breakfast, Dan?” I said.

“Maybe physically, but Dan will never join us,” said Josh. I ignored Josh.

“Yeah. I’m here for breakfast,” said Dan.

Dan walked over to the long table at the end of the day room to find his tray. He just stared at all the trays like he was waiting for his to stand up and shout, “Me, take me!” I went to the table and found his tray for him.

“Here, Dan, this one is yours.”

Dan held his hand out to shake mine; he liked shaking hands. I think it assured him that we were real. I put his tray

in his hand and patted his shoulder.

"Thanks, God."

"Come on, Dan." We walked over to the table where Josh and I were sitting. Before Dan would sit down I had to take his tray and set it on the table with the fork, knife, and spoon set up in a row to the right of the tray.

Josh watched us. "What a screw-up," he said.

"Shut up," I said. Josh shot me an angry look. Most people avoided Josh because he had almost killed someone in a dissociative fit. Supposedly his mind shut down when he got angry and he would attack people. He was all talk. We all were.

I sat down across from Dan and looked into his eyes. They were empty. Dan walked like his soul had fled and his body was trying to remember how to repeat daily processes. The three of us sat and ate in silence.

I had just taken Dan's and my trays back to the long table at the end of the day room and sat back down when Lily came in with Nick, my therapist. They were going to lead the morning meeting.

"Alright, everybody. Please sit down." Lily looked around the room to see who wasn't there. "Andy, Nancy, and Pete are here," she said. Lily reminded me of that woman on Romper Room who looked through her magic mirror to see all the kids in TV land.

"Where's Mike and Trina? Are they coming?" asked Lily. "Well, we'll start without them." Lily noticed Dan sitting next to me. "Dan, should you be here?"

"Yeah! He's the craziest one of all. Of course he should be here." Josh laughed at his own joke.

"Enough, Josh," said Lily, "Dan, please go back to your room." Nick got up and walked over to Dan. Taking him by the arm, he led Dan out.

"Now," said Lily, "does anyone have an issue to bring up today?"

"Yes," I said, "why couldn't I call the radio station?"

"Will, you are here to learn to live a healthy, functional

life, not make phone calls to DJ's."

"That's part of living a healthy life. It's making contact with other people," I said.

"Yes, it is. But not meaningful contact."

"Please define meaningful contact." Being a college student, I liked to challenge their ideas and force them to think.

"Please, Will. You're being difficult," Lily said.

"No. I think I deserve an answer."

"Will, I'm not going to put up with this. Why are you acting out? You're never like this."

"Because I think I should have some say in what I do," I said.

"You do."

"Bullshit."

"Will, go to your room," said Lily.

I did.

I sat on my bed and ran through the rest of the morning meeting in my head. Mike would walk in late and complain that we only had four set times to smoke and he wanted more because he had nicotine fits. An argument would start and Lily would say that the discussion would continue tomorrow.

I sat on my bench and watched Dan, who was in the room across from me. He kept wandering around. Nick was still with him, trying to get him to sit down and draw or something. But Dan wanted to be out with everybody. Nick kept wiping his face and running his fingers through his hair. I think he was frustrated with Dan.

"Ed, can you get a coat for Dan?" Nick asked in a shout. I smiled. They were taking Dan for a walk. He deserved it.

I got up and walked to the door of my room. Ed, the male nurse, was running down the hall. In his hand was a white coat. Across the hall, Nick had gotten Dan to sit on the bed. Ed walked in and unfolded the coat. Its sleeves were long. With buckles.

"Hold your arms out, Dan," said Nick. Dan did.

Ed walked over and slid the jacket on Dan, who stared

across the hall at me. His eyes were still empty. He had become a lamb, trusting sadistic shepherds. Bill pulled Dan's arms across his chest and began to buckle the sleeves to the back.

"No!" said Dan, "you can't do this." His eyes filled with tears. "God. Help me."

I tried to move. I was powerless. Tears steamed down my face.

"Let him go, Nick," I said.

Nick looked at me. "Shut your door, Will."

I did.





Shades

Julie B. Hodge

To Finish Where Poe Left Off

One night in a drunken slumber,
I was awoken by a plunder.
“What the hell could it possibly be?”
Was the only thought that occurred to me.
Could it be that mutt next door;
No, it was that wretched raven crying, “nevermore.”

I had had enough of this foul mouthed bird;
To put up with this just seemed absurd.
“How to deal with this devil,” in my mind kept clicking;
Now I can honestly say, “raven tastes like chicken.”
I sent him back to “Night’s Plutonian Shore,”
And that bird will bother me “nevermore.”

Kenneth Johnson



Childhood Dreams

Renee Hill

Just Desserts

Freya Roseane Poller

On the day that Aaron Wolf Johnson decided to kill his wife, he went to the grocery store and bought a grocery basket full of the most sumptuous food.

As he drove his Volvo out of their circular driveway, he imagined walking up and down the aisles, coveting and fondling the most exotic foods.

“Papaya nectar. . .,” he murmured as he came to the stop sign at the end of Lighthouse Pointe Drive. He smacked his lips thoughtfully, imagining the taste of the thick, pink, viscous liquid.

“Four years! Coupon cutting! Scrimping! Pinching!” He hit the steering wheel in his frustration and barely missed hitting two kids on bikes. They gaped as he distractedly regained control of the car. His knuckles whitened from his grip on the wheel.

“Macadamia nuts. Ah, what delights. Eleven dollars a pound. I will leave a pile of nutshells on the Country Geese Simulated Pine Table. Maybe she’ll keel over from that alone.” He licked his lips in anticipation.

In his excitement, Aaron failed to notice stop signs, neglected to use turn signals, and sped with the most blinding fury to Harris Teeter, his favorite grocery store. He made it to the store unscathed; he had the sheer will of someone giddy with the excitement of killing his wife.

He sat panting in his Volvo in the grocery parking lot. His shaky hands reached up for the rearview mirror. A little this way, there. Nice face, not bad as a whole. He looked into his own eyes.

Hopelessly bloodshot.

“Visine. . .check,” he said aloud as he added to his list. “And a train for Bobby, and a dolly for Suzie, and for my Miranda, a meal to die for!” he sang gleefully as his ticker tape list unfurled into his lap.

"I don't look like the type who would kill his wife," he reassured himself in the mirror. "Such a nice nose and a kindly mouth," he said, practicing smiles and grimaces.

He ran shaky fingers through his limp hair and clutched at the scalp. "Maniacal? No, just a little harried. I'll comb it just in case."

Gray hairs in the comb.

"Not gray, silver. You are a very handsome man," he said into the rearview with perfect frankness. His reflection did not respond.

Once inside, Aaron found the most perfect grocery cart. It was an object of sheer beauty, all shiny chrome with superbly oiled wheels that all went the same direction at the same time. The bar grip was smooth and red, a color most conducive to shopping. The cart hummed quietly as it and Aaron moved out of the cart corral into Harris Teeter proper.

Aaron hummed along with his cart, a tuneless hum that propelled him in just the right direction, past the impulse-buying-trial-size-travel-sample-aisle. He wasn't in the mood to mess with piddly stuff.

On to produce!

"The more colors in a meal, the healthier to kill you with, my dear," he giggled as he felt the red, green, and yellow peppers for the perfect resilience. He chose two of each, at \$1.29 a pound.

He chose endive, arugula, leeks, and escarole with equal fondness.

"Vitamin D! Beta carotene! Be sure you get plenty of greens," he called to a pale, goateed passerby.

The circular glasses turned to look at him.

"Thanks, man, you must really care."

Aaron smiled and turned his attention to cauliflower. No, snow peas. They have such a good crunch. He filled his bag and picked up a beautiful bulb of garlic.

"To keep vampires away," he thought, "but it won't do the littlest bit of good against me!"

He wore a wide smile as he loaded a perfect cantaloupe,

two pomegranates, an ugli-fruit, an avocado, and two black plums into the basket. Lettuce, cucumber, tomatoes, and scallions for a small salad were added as an afterthought.

"I'll do her up in grand style. All seven courses. What for a soup?" he wondered as his cart rounded out of produce and into canned goods.

His trip through canned goods was short enough; he scoffed at the pre-fab meals.

"Miranda, my love, I know that you would disapprove, but I must forego the Cambell's for tonight. I shall feed you leek soup in high style."

He consulted his list. Veggies, taken care of. No canned foods that he really needed, so he could move to his favorite section, the ethnic food aisle.

He ran his fingers over the shiny packages of oriental noodles.

Where was that jar of curry?

The Seven Rajah brand of curry in the spicy variety was the item he lusted after every time he traveled this aisle.

There it was. It had a broken safety seal, and every time he came here, he opened it and took a sniff. Surreptitiously at first, but then long, blissful inhalations. At eight dollars for two ounces it was a little pricey, but—

"What the hell! You only live once, and some longer than others!" he crowed as a jar of curry with an unbroken safety seal took its place in the front of the basket, nestled in with the leaf lettuce. He gazed at it lovingly. This was not on his list, but he felt that he deserved it.

"Oh, Miranda, it feels so good to buy things that you would never approve of. I'm almost a free man," he thought. "I have longed for that curry for eons."

Aaron felt a small twinge of regret when he realized that he had almost finished his list. He was almost done shopping. Only dairy, sweets, and meats were left to purchase. But he forged on; he had a task to accomplish.

Aaron raced through dairy, grabbing ricotta cheese and smoked edam, plain lowfat yogurt and 2% milk. He also

picked up eggs and neufchatel cheese. He moved quickly until he thought that he must look like those fools on "Supermarket Sweep." With the thought of that ridiculous game show, he slowed to an acceptable pace.

He made it to the baking aisle and got a bag of semi-sweet miniature M&M's. They were Miranda's favorite. He thought of her fondly, eating the entire two pound bag in one sitting. She did have some endearing traits.

Aaron felt a little sad when he realized he could never again hold her hand as she suffered a two pound M&M overdose.

Oh, well.

Aaron's last stop was at the meat section. He had special ordered a gorgeous turkey; eighteen pounds of perfection. It was a never-frozen beauty, all cold and goose-bumped. He watched as Kale the butcher wrapped the bird in white paper and taped it with plenty of white tape.

"Did you remember the cranberries for the stuffing?" asked Kale.

He received no answer because Aaron was clutching his turkey and heading in a beeline for the checkout.

The checkout girl had purple hair and a rather peculiar speech affectation.

"Wow, you're cooking up a killer meal, sir! That curry is to die for. I got some just last week, and I was in absolute heaven!" she said.

"You, Janine," Aaron said as he glanced at her tag, "you are absolutely dead on."

He got his change and fairly bounced out of the store.

Aaron was very careful driving home. His turkey sat in the passenger's seat. Aaron considered buckling the bird in, but decided against it.

"We wouldn't want anyone to think I was crazy, would we?"

No answer.

"It would be tragic to have bought all this lovely food and crash on the way home. The fates would have cheated me.

You'll be divine, Turkey. Few turkeys are destined for greater things." He patted the turkey and wiped the condensation on his pants.

"So many people are just frightfully dull about killing. They shoot or strangle or stab. And they always get caught. I am more clever. . .so clever. You will be my accomplice, but don't worry; they can't catch us!"

Aaron lowered his voice to a whisper. "You see, all I have to do is take some turkey fat, let it sit out for a few hours, and it will breed the most lovely, deadly food poisons! The only problem is how to have Miranda eat it without also getting sick myself. . .I haven't quite decided how to do it yet. . ." He mentally rearranged his plan as the Volvo rounded onto Lighthouse Pointe Drive.

The sign on his street jerked him out of his reverie. "I hate it! Lighthouse Point-E! Why can't they just spell it correctly? Miranda just loves the spelling. 'Oh, Baby, it's just so sophisticated sounding,' was what she said when we moved in."

"I guess it shows where her tastes lie," he told the turkey.

The turkey remained a silent accomplice. Aaron pulled into the circular driveway and spent the next fifteen minutes unloading his bags of groceries onto the kitchen counter.

He shuddered every time he opened the back door to see the powder blue geese honking "back door guests are best" under a powder pink, heart-shaped cartoon dialogue bubble.

After Aaron put away all the groceries, he brought his turkey out of the fridge. He cleaned it. "There, my little turkey. Let's get all those harmful bacteria off. We'll save them for the one who really deserves it!"

He spiced it. "Here's some parsley, and pepper, and an apple for your cavity. We have to fill it, my dear!"

He trussed it and tied it with the utmost care. "I don't mean to stifle you, but it must be done," he apologized. "Just think about what you will become and the mitzvah you will do."

He cleaned up his mess, wiped the counter very carefully with Clorox, and threw the scraps in the trash — but reserved about an ounce of fat and skin. He put it in a blue bowl with geese dancing around the rim. He took the bowl into the bedroom that he shared with Miranda and placed it in the upper left hand corner of the very highest shelf of their closet, next to the pink mink that she won for selling Mary-Kay cosmetics.

He heard the back door opening and almost fell off his step ladder.

He walked into the kitchen and greeted her.

“Hello, Miranda, how was your day?” Aaron smiled the most loving smile he could muster.

Miranda fixed one eye and a cocked eyebrow on him. She drew herself up to her full five feet three inches and placed a fist on her ample hip.

“What are you doing home? And what are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m fixing a romantic, gourmet dinner for just the two of us,” Aaron cooed.

“But I picked up Stouffer’s chicken potpies on the way home!”

Aaron thought about people who killed and their motivation. Some people killed for revenge. Some killed for the experience of snuffing a life. He thought that another hideous Stouffer’s potpie was reason enough to legitimize his act.

“Don’t you like Miranda’s kitchen?” she demanded, tapping a pointy-shoed foot. “Oh, go ahead, but I want to know exactly how much money you spent on junk. Just remember that all these little extras come out of the account to buy our Country Touch living room group. You need to set some priorities.”

“And my day was fine,” she added. “Mary Kathryn said that I have the shiniest hair she’s ever seen. And I sold Miss Barkley a whole Day-To-Nite beauty set. She needs it to cover that prune face just as much as we need the money. Especially since you decided to squander

our income on junk!" she spat.

"All right, Miranda," Aaron sighed, "I'll be more careful. Look! I bought your favorite!" He singsonged, swinging the bag of M&M's he got for the express purpose of taming the savage beast.

"Oooh! You do love me!" squealed Miranda as she made a grab for the bag.

Aaron maneuvered out of her way and poured a handful into a goose cup. "This is all you can have right now. Don't spoil your appetite."

Miranda took the M&M's and a plastic cup of purple Kool-aid into the living room.

"There she goes. She's so classy," said Aaron, under his breath, of course. "I wish I could see some good qualities in her. She's just turned into such a flat character."

Full of motivation, and with renewed inspiration, Aaron set out to cook the most fantastic meal of their lives. He could smell his turkey accomplice growing tasty and brown in the oven. Aaron shivered with eagerness.

"I can't wait! I can't!" he said, partly to his turkey, partly to himself.

The problem of where to put the spoiled turkey fat was still a problem. In the leek soup? Miranda wandered in and sniffed the pot.

"It smells hideous. You know I hate the smell of cooking onions. It stinks up the house for weeks. What are those things floating in it?"

She stabbed at the soup with the wooden spoon.

So much for tainting the soup. Aaron went on to the other dishes. He blanched the peppers in olive oil and pushed them out of their skins. He stir-fried the snow peas with the fantastic curry. He carefully tore apart arugula, escarole, endive, and romaine lettuce for the green salad. He added cucumber, scallions, and a couple of Roma tomatoes for color. The pureed peppers combined with balsamic vinegar and extra-virgin olive oil made the dressing. He beat eggs, neufchatel, vanilla and sugar together to make flan, a Spanish egg custard.

He split the avocado and filled it with garnet sauce. The turkey aroma wafted through the house.

Miranda wandered in and out of the room, poking at the food and making faces.

Aaron's tolerance was deteriorating as Miranda scoffed at every dish. A little blue vein pulsed on his forehead each time Miranda proclaimed her distaste. He was running out of options.

"In the M&M's?" he wondered aloud.

Through the din of his cluttered head, Aaron heard the toilet flush and the bathroom door open. He noticed with exasperation that she didn't wash her hands — again. Miranda walked into the kitchen for more Kool-aid and Aaron knew what he must do.

Once Miranda was back on the couch and thoroughly engrossed in "her show," Aaron sneaked past the living room.

His body thrummed with adrenaline as he walked with a calculated nonchalance to their bedroom. Aaron felt for the pull chain. Where was it? Finally, he found it, and the miser bulb illuminated their — her closet. Aaron studied the frilly garments and looked at the pile of shoes. At last count there were thirty-one pairs. Would Goodwill make a house pickup when she was gone?

Aaron saw her senior yearbook, and began to leaf through it. He remembered, flipping through black and white photos, why he had loved Miranda in the beginning.

She had such a pretty smile, and a perfect flip at the bottom of her hair. Aaron used to tell his friends that he liked her for much more than her looks. He loved to brag about how she volunteered with the kids at the hospital and still had time to go with him to dinner at his grandmother's house.

He was especially proud that she could really carry a decent conversation. So few girls could do that.

"So what happened?" Aaron wondered, as he sighed and closed the book.

Aaron climbed the stepladder and saw the pink mink.

Next to it, in a little powder-blue dish, was the turkey fat. It had been sitting out for hours. Aaron sniffed and wrinkled his nose. It was definitely off. It should do the trick. The turkey consumer hotline warned against letting turkey sit out of refrigeration for even a few hours, and this one had been in a hot closet. Next to a pink mink!

He took the fat into the bathroom and dipped his index and middle fingers into the bowl. Like an accomplished artist, he spread a thin coat of grease on the toilet handle. It really did not feel much different from regular oils or shortening, but Aaron chuckled at the deadly difference.

“Serves her right for not washing her hands after. And it serves her right for all these damn geese,” he said.

“It’s funny how you never learn these things until you are married to someone. Things used to be so much different. I thought that marrying the homecoming queen was a real reward. It makes me sad that her personality deteriorated with her looks. She’ll never know what hit her,” he said as he washed his hands three times in hot water and anti-bacterial soap.

When Aaron called Miranda into the dining room, she took one look at the candles and flicked on the overhead light. Aaron pulled out a chair for Miranda, so she pulled out the one next to it and sat down.

Even this behavior did nothing to dim Aaron’s spirits. He savored every drop of his leek soup — it was a Martha Stewart Recipe. The salad was delectable; he closed his eyes and inhaled the pungent pepper and balsamic vinegar dressing’s aroma.

He ignored Miranda, who was pushing everything back and forth and around in an attempt to look busy.

He carved the turkey, brown and fragrant, and was pleasantly surprised that it came out so moist. He ate the turkey and kasha pilaf stuffing and thought of Martha Stewart and how proud she would be. His fantasies were fulfilled when he tasted the forbidden curried snowpeas.

Aaron was so involved in the act of eating that he

almost forgot Miranda was there. She watched him murmur and sigh, and close his eyes and experience flavors and textures.

"You don't even sigh like that when I put on my Victoria's Secret's teddy," she whimpered, seeming very sad. Her sadness turned to anger fairly quickly when she noticed that Aaron didn't notice.

"Why can't you cook normal food?" she asked, "This tastes like shit!"

Aaron opened his eyes. He studied Miranda very carefully, as if she were a rare insect under glass.

He saw the stylish hair, dark at the roots. He saw the fastidiously applied makeup, a bit smeared around the eyes and mouth. He saw the angora sweater with a Kool-aid stain on the left breast.

It was droopier than it used to be.

"Eat some turkey, sweetie," Aaron murmured. "You like turkey, remember? It was your favorite at Thanksgiving."

Miranda looked at Aaron through mascara-smeared eyes and picked a piece of skin off the turkey. She nibbled at it and a little glob of grease dribbled down her chin.

Aaron wiped it off with his napkin and smiled at Miranda.

Miranda excused herself, and Aaron had a dish of flan with kahlua topping. He ate tiny bites, feeling every mouthful and giving it his full attention. When the flan was gone, Aaron ran his finger around the rim of the bowl, his bowl. It was a very pretty Chinese bowl, with trees and pagodas.

"I like pretty things," Aaron whispered.

Now all there was to do was wait. Aaron washed the dishes, pots, pans, and kitchen gadgets that contributed to his piece de resistance.

Miranda watched six television shows in a row, and Aaron smiled to hear the toilet flush between episodes. Miranda ate the remaining pound and three quarters of M&M's.

When she came into the kitchen with a stomachache,

Aaron was very sympathetic.

“Miranda, you probably just ate too much. It was good, wasn’t it! Here’s some Pepto.” He thrilled inside to see her choke down the chalky pink.

An hour later, when she was sweaty, pale, and cramping, Aaron stroked her forehead.

“Oh, my little goose. Maybe next time you won’t eat two pounds of chocolate. If you don’t feel better in the morning, we’ll call the doctor.”

Aaron tucked Miranda in and kissed her sweaty forehead.

He climbed into bed next to her, turned off his bedside lamp, and fell asleep.



Obsessive Compulsive
Karen Gwinner



Helena
Jennifer L. Cohen

Patty's Coming
Mary O'Sako

The peak of Marcy's initial excitement over the fresh news of her sister's impending visit took a downward spiral as she stared at the *Justin Elementary School Calendar* on her refrigerator door. She'd circled April fifth with red ink, and now it glared in mocking contrast to the white of the page. *Two weeks Marcy, two weeks*, it may as well have shouted to her. "Oh, no!" Marcy wailed. "Only two weeks?! Oh, *hell* no!"

She fingered the edge of the latest canvas upon which she'd been painting and looked around the room frantically. The entire house bore the evidence of her family's hectic lives like a cluttered vaudeville stage *after* a long night of performances. Half of the kitchen table currently served as lab to Mathew's science project, Sarah's scout uniforms were still piled in a basket by the table awaiting alterations, and David's daily newspapers were crammed to bursting beneath the sofa.

Marcy herself was equally guilty, with the brushes, tubes and bottles of her craft piled haphazardly in the corner of the room like the spoils of a rummage sale.

“Well, *Scarlet*, you can’t just think about this tomorrow or you *will* go crazy!” Marcy soliloquized. The cuckoo clock above the mantle chimed eleven. She had exactly three hours until the bus dropped off her children and six until David pulled into the driveway. *Let’s hit it!* Without pausing to remove the dried paint from her fingers, she scooped up a pile of half empty paint tubes and tossed them into a box, then hauled several bundles of David’s old newspapers out to the car. The sight of the vacuum cleaner sent Edward, their mutt, slinking up the stairs in search of more tranquil surroundings. “Traitor!” she yelled after him.

As Marcy cleaned, she scrolled through that morning’s conversation with her sister in her mind, trying to weigh the contents and sift through the details. Something more than the tiny wave of excitement over the arrival of a houseguest of her sister’s magnitude was swelling inside her.

“Hey, Marcy! Guess what?”

“What?”

“I’m finally coming to visit you, sweetie!”

“Sure, sure you are,” Marcy snickered and balanced the phone on one shoulder while she added a dab of dark color to the center of some sunflowers she was painting. “What’s going on, Pat?”

“I am. *We* are. Don has some days off from work at Easter, and we decided it was high time to fly out to see you folks! God, I’m so excited. Just think, Marcy, I finally get to see *all* of you, together, in the same room. Think of the time we’ll have!”

“I hope *so*! It’s been too long. Mathew and Sarah have grown so tall! And David and I are just getting on with it. Wait, are you sure you and Don don’t have some other foreign locale to jet-set off to?”

“Cute. *No*, sister, we have no prominent commitment except you. Don’t you think it’s time? I’m ashamed we

haven't made it thus far! And I'll bet you look fabulous! Just think, we can go to the movies together, shop. . .the *beach!* You guys *do* have access to a beach out there somewhere?"

"Of course we do, although it's a little cool yet. But it's great for walking. This is so, so. . .I just can't believe you're *coming!*" She smeared more dark paint into the sunflower and smoothed it out toward the edges to add a shadow to the garden she'd painted.

"Well, we are, and you're on! Just tell that handsome husband of yours to move over 'cause here we come!"

What's it been, Patty, five years? Six? She mused as she dusted the framed pictures in the dining room. She paused over Patty and Don's wedding photo. Her sister was a sleek, golden creature clinging gracefully to Don's arm. "*Don, who'd ever thought,*" she sighed wistfully before returning the portrait into its nest atop the buffet with the others.

The beach, you always did love the beach, Patty, and why not? She paused in front of the full length mirror in their bedroom and put down the clothes basket she'd been carrying on her hip. You have that olive complexion from Dad, *while I,* she peered closely at her face, *am Mommy's girl, freckled marshmallow all the way.*

Marcy removed her top and pants and studied herself more closely. She had become too comfortable of late in her thirty-five year old skin, and she was forever postponing the inevitable diet. She told herself there was always tomorrow, or that David never complained, or they were just plain too busy. The body in the mirror told a different tale, a sobering one of too many helpings and too many Friday night pizzas.

Marcy let down her tangled mass of red hair and thought about Patty's own black tresses. A long forgotten summer afternoon came to her suddenly. Patty was laughing and running down the beach on legs that were tanned perfection. She was in pursuit of Don, the bodyguard, who'd stolen her towel. "Help me get him, *Dave !*" Patty had squealed, her hair streaming down her back in an ebony waterfall. David, whom Marcy had recently begun dating, stared after them with

a wolf-like grin as he sat quietly with Marcy beneath the shade of an umbrella. Marcy listened to their cavorting with ever-reddening ears while she sketched in the sand. She was steaming beneath that umbrella, a T-shirt protecting her skin and the frizz of her hair caught up in a ponytail.

Marcy swallowed and turned to the right and then left to examine her profile. Her breasts were fine, but things were a veritable down-hill sled ride from there. Her belly, streaked lightly with silver stretch marks and slackened with eighteen months of childbearing, hung softly over the tops of her panties while her thighs and buttocks took up the slack below.

"Two weeks," Marcy muttered and pulled her sweats back on. She slid a box of loose photos from beneath the bed, digging until she found the most recent one of Patty. It was the one taken two years ago on the beach in California: the one where she looked like an exotic creature from Bora-Bora or somewhere; the one David had whistled long over when he'd pulled it from the Christmas card they'd sent. "You're on," she muttered.

"But, Mom, why'd you stick it on the fridge?" asked Sarah that afternoon, her hazel eyes huge beneath hair as bright as Marcy's.

"It's so she'll know we've been thinking of her," Marcy lied.

"Weird," Mathew snickered before galloping from the room with Edward close on his heels.

"Weird? No way. Aren't there enough pictures on display through the rest of the house? Besides, I consider the fridge a place of honor. It's where I put *your* stuff."

Sarah shrugged politely, her attention already shifting gears in the chameleon way of eight year olds. She kissed the back of Marcy's hand with a loud smack and skipped away. Marcy raised her eyebrows and gritted her teeth.

"To all of us, a dish to prove my worthiness of *certain* worldly palates," she giggled and toasted the photo with a package of tofu, which she deftly began to hack into. *Tofu*. The truth was Marcy had never laid hands on tofu until that

afternoon, when she'd sped across the street to the *Food King* to make it her sole purchase after having seen it on a cooking show. The celebrity chef who'd handled it had been of "*world class status*," the invisible announcer had assured his television audience. "World class," Marcy repeated slowly. Soon she was well into the process of creating a low calorie, gourmet delight that she was certain would dazzle her family's taste buds. Marcy began to whistle. *Patty and Don are certainly 'world class' in **their** existence, flying all over with that job of his.*

"It's stir-fry, with *tofu*," Marcy explained proudly at dinner. She carefully placed the evening's masterpiece on the center of the table before her speechless family. "I got it straight from *The Fabulous Chefs of America*. It's a *world class* dish."

"Is it burnt?" Mathew asked, squinting up at her with his father's brown eyes as a pungent odor laced the steam from Marcy's masterpiece, saturating the space around them.

"No, it isn't *burned*. I most certainly would not serve you anything that was not cooked to perfection," she responded with false cheer, glancing across the table to where David, still in his shirt and tie from work, was leaning over a *Mechanics* magazine propped conspicuously against his dish. "It's very tasty, you'll see!" She kicked at David's foot.

"Oh, yeah. Hey, I hear *Arnold* eats this stuff every night out in Hollywood!" He boomed emphatically without looking up. Mathew and Sarah shuddered beneath a spell of noisy laughter.

"I bet Aunt Patty likes this stuff; you can cook it for her when she comes, Mom! She lives in California like a *real* movie-star!" Sarah announced with a huge grin.

"She sure does," David murmured, sliding his magazine under his seat.

"Yes," Marcy agreed, trying not to wince over her first forkful.

David finally felt the daggers she was throwing him with her eyes. He also took a bite and began to cough. He

grabbed his water and quickly swallowed several mouthfuls while Marcy glared at him over the jostling forms of the children. He smiled sheepishly.

"Well, this is the best tofu stir-fry *I've* ever eaten," Marcy chirped.

After giving in to an added entree of tuna fish sandwiches for the kids, Marcy cursed Dave silently when he retreated to the den to plant his male-thin buttocks in his chair. She hurriedly rinsed the last plate and crammed the dishwasher full to the explosion point.

"You guys want to earn some money?" Marcy bent over Sarah and Mathew's prone forms in front of the television.

"Yes!" Sarah answered brightly while Mathew shrugged.

"All right then. Your rooms, clean 'em. Maybe start with your dresser drawers first. I will be in to inspect when you are finished. Now, go or you won't have time for your favorite show later!" Sarah jumped up immediately, the tiny, plastic animal she'd been dissecting falling from her body like bright rain. She skipped lightly ahead of her trudging brother on their way up the stairs.

Marcy turned off the television and faced David alone.

"Lot needs done around here, don't you think, *baby*?"

"Certainly," he mumbled, flicking his gaze from newspaper, to her, then back again in the time it takes a cloud to flit over the moon. Marcy edged over to where he sat and jerked lightly on the corner of his paper.

"I'm going out for a walk, *Dad*. Would you mind watching over your spawn *and* the house for an hour please?"

"Walk? Isn't it getting dark?" he observed absently.

"Yes. You gonna fess up and play ball?"

"All you had to do was ask." He frowned and scratched at his short beard.

"I am."

"Thought you were going to paint."

"Later," Marcy yelled over her shoulder. She closed

the door softly behind her.

Marcy headed for *Justin Memorial Park*, where she sweated the first of many nights of laps around the lake, ignoring her rumbling belly and the number of svelte runners who bounded like a herd of gazelle past a lumbering water buffalo. An enviably thin girl with long, black hair like Patty's brushed into her as she glided by.

"Sorry," she breathed back at Marcy.

"S'okay," Marcy huffed. *Miss hair and ass!* Her face reddened and she thought about Patty.

"*We'll be like two peas in a pod. Blood friends forever, Marcy.*" Patty's ten-year-old voice sang sweetly in her ear. Marcy had then watched anxiously as Patty blossomed ahead of her, outgrowing her. She went from a pony-tailed bosom buddy into a Cleopatra almost overnight, leaving Marcy to flounder alone.

"Your sister is *too cool*," David had told her the first night she'd brought him home to meet her family.

"*Cool*," Marcy muttered. She chugged along painfully until a cold breeze that smelled of rain sent her home.

Later that evening, when they were alone and she and David had finished stowing the last child away for the night, he asked if she would join him in just a "tiny" scoop of vanilla ice cream.

"No way," she answered through a tiny yawn. She leaned against the sink, narrowing her eyes and waiting. He paused before Patty's languid figure before retrieving the tub of ice cream from the freezer.

"Sure?" He held a loaded bowl toward her.

"Yes, I'm sure. I'm watching."

"Watching?"

"My weight. I've grown softer than I ever thought I'd be. Besides, don't you think it's time you had the sex-kitten, beach-bunny type you've always *secretly* yearned for?"

"What?" David sputtered in an effort to keep from laughing. White droplets clung to his beard like milk. Marcy automatically handed him a napkin.

“You laugh?”

“I’m sorry Marcy, it’s the *way* you said it, that’s all.”

He mopped at his beard and winked before returning to the den where he slid back into his chair. Marcy followed close behind. “Don’t worry, if you keep cooking stuff like that there tofu, something tells me we will all be dropping weight like bad news.”

“I liked my tofu stir-fry. It was very, very *haute couture*.”

“Very *what* ?” His eyes crinkled in amusement.

Marcy ignored him and continued, “It’s easy for you, isn’t it, *Mr. Tight-Buns* ?” She slapped his thigh.

“Whatever. Guess the kids and I are an unsophisticated bunch, strictly meat and potatoes,” he mumbled around the last large spoonful.

“Well, I suppose I can spare you-all. But *I’m* going to stay on the race track. My sister will see she isn’t the only one with *chic*.”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

“Well, just don’t lose too much of this, my *tofu-queen*,” he patted her rear and put down his bowl. “I like it.”

Marcy snatched the bowl from her recently oiled coffee table and reached with her free hand to tug at his beard.

“*Well*, you should lose a *lot* of this. I don’t think my sister and her husband are into lycanthropy, darling.”

“No?”

“*No*.”

“*Touché*,” he whispered before retrieving his magazine and propping his feet. Marcy didn’t hear. She’d gone to pull out her box of acrylics and the half colored canvas. It was a commission from Mrs. Spencer next door.

“Put a real heavy looking cow in the middle of a garden; I want everyone who eats at my table to notice it!” Mrs. Spencer had told her the previous week. *I’ll make it heavy all right*, thought Marcy. She glanced back into the den where David’s magazine obliterated his face, then fished out a tube

from which she squeezed a puddle of black onto her clean palette, thus allowing the painting to encompass her until long after he'd gone to bed and the only semblance of life left in the room was Edward, who lay stretched out beneath her chair until she put away the last brush and turned off the lights.

Patty's long, tanned phantom held court over Marcy's activities for the next several days. Marcy managed to keep her at bay with furious hours of dusting, rearranging, mopping, and jogging. She took the children with her on her forced journey to reassess order in her house: one night they sorted clothing, the next it was toys. And always they responded to her nightly forays with assorted grumbling while David followed along aimlessly, allowing Marcy to give him the occasional nudge with a nonchalance that made her stomach tighten. Marcy felt dizzy with relief when she'd finally coaxed him into finishing minor repairs in the guest bathroom.

"Here," she reached to steady the towel rack he was tightening. "Do you think it's straight?"

"Of course it is." He pressed into the screwdriver as it whined to a stop before setting up the next screw.

"Are you sure? You wouldn't want to commit to a finish and find it's crooked, would you?"

David paused and looked at her tiredly. "Take it easy, Marcy. *You're* the one who wanted to tear the place apart. I'm doing the best I can. I checked, and it *is* straight. I wouldn't have put it up if it weren't. Have a little faith, would ya?"

"Sorry, I'm, I'm just nervous about Patty's coming and I want things to look their best," she sighed.

"I know, I know." He shook his head and leaned into the task once more.

Something in the quivering slant of his shoulder brought back the night she'd first seen Patty with Don. Marcy had spent that smoldering afternoon straightening her hair and had finished by pulling on her new *hot pink* blouse. *Hot pink*, it had been the latest fad in teendom that summer, and Marcy felt it had been discovered for her alone. When Don had

finished mowing her parents' lawn out back, she was ready. She'd tip-toed breathlessly down the back stairs only to find them wrapped tightly together against the pantry wall. Patty and Don, her Don, together. And they'd never even seen her. She stayed just long enough to see Patty's hair become en-meshed in his moving form, some of the long strands sticking to his moist shoulder like tentacles.

Marcy retreated to the kitchen where Sarah was coloring a "*Welcome Aunt Patty and Uncle Don*" poster. She fingered her orange tresses and watched Sarah's busily pumping fingers smudge Patty's name across the page in bright red.

"That's *perfect*, honey," she commented softly before turning to pull out the fixings for that evening's dinner.

"Are we eating gloom again?" Sarah asked in a high voice.

"*What ?* Oh! Nope, just plain old *throw in the oven* chicken. And that's *gourmet*, Sarah, not *gloom*." Marcy began to rip the skin from the chicken she was preparing.

"Mathew says it's gloom," Sarah muttered primly. The phone rang before Marcy could reply. It was her mother. She set the baking sheet down loudly and listened to her mother talk about the weather, Dad's gout, and the last bridge game before she finally intervened.

"Mom, have you talked to Patty?"

"Oh, yes and she's so excited about coming out there to New Hampshire, dear. It's great you girls can get finally together. I can't believe that either of you couldn't have gotten yourselves up for the trip long before this. And you were so *close* as children. I just don't know about you kids," she sighed.

"Yes, I know what you mean. Listen, when did you last *see* Patty? We were so excited I forgot to ask her how they were. She *looked* okay, didn't she? Everything is fine with them?" Marcy spoke quickly, taking tiny nibbles of celery in between sentences.

"What? Oh, Patty looks gorgeous; she *always* does.

That's so nice to worry about your sister like this, but really, Marcy, they are *fine*. Don is still climbing the ladder and all, and you know how they like to live high off the hog! Now what's this all about?"

"Nothing. Like you said, I was worried. Well, yeah, great, I *am* glad to hear that all is okay," she answered weakly. "It's just been such a long time since I've seen her, that's all."

"Well, you always *were* a worry-wart."

Yeah, a real worry-wart all right, Marcy thought dismally as David rushed through the kitchen with his tool box and slammed the door to the garage closed behind him.

That evening, Marcy stayed an extra hour at the park, walking out her last mile and relishing the slice of moon that wavered in and out of view behind black, stubborn clouds. When she got home the lights in the den were dimmed and David was sitting erect on the sofa. A cup of fragrant coffee was steaming on a coaster before him.

"Did you have a good run?" David spoke quietly and pointed to the sleeping form of Sarah, her body curled up and covered before the silent television set. Marcy smiled and nodded. She knelt and warmed her hands on his cup.

"Sarah was worried so I let her stay up."

"Thank you."

"You gonna paint awhile?" He leaned back into the sofa, his freshly shaven face half illuminated by the light from the lamp. Marcy swallowed. His chin, buried for so long, was strong and angular beneath the kind slant of his lip. All of his features seemed to blend in a pale, almost painterly way she'd long forgotten.

"Yes," she answered quickly and felt herself blush. She turned her face away and touched the tip of Sarah's toe.

"I'll get her." David rose and lifted Sarah's limp form.

"Thanks, David," Marcy breathed. He nodded and moved heavily towards the stair, Sarah's bright head dangling from his shoulder. Edward stretched from his spot beneath the coffee table and trotted slowly after them. "Edward?" she called and clicked her tongue. Edward paused. Glancing back,

he wagged his tail apologetically before ambling on. *Traitor*. Marcy finished David's coffee when he didn't return and pulled out her paints.

The afternoon before Patty and Don's scheduled arrival came swiftly. Marcy found a quiet moment after dinner to slip into her bathroom for the long anticipated private inventory before the mirror. She stripped and stared at her reflection. Her stomach *seemed* less protuberant, but to her it only accentuated the bubble in her rear. She stepped on the scale for the first time in almost two weeks and waited for the red needle to catch on one of the magic numbers swaying behind it. When it finally settled, she stared in disbelief. *Only five pounds?* She stepped off, then on again. She quickly dressed and retrieved a five pound bag of sugar from the kitchen and placed it on the scales. *Five pounds*. She weighed herself a third time. Finally, she sighed and donned her sweats.

"Can we come?" Mathew and Sarah chorused, bounding on coltish pre-teen legs when they saw her emerge from the bedroom, tennis shoes in hand. David joined them from the kitchen, wiping his hands on a damp dish towel.

"Okay."

"You sure?" David smiled. "They might hold you back."

"I'm sure. Besides, I think they'll be miles ahead by the time I finish."

"C'mon, Mom!" Mathew bellowed.

"All right, all ready," Marcy yelled back. She sat heavily beside David on the sofa, tucking her feet reluctantly into her shoes, distantly aware of the news that had been flashing quietly on the television. It signed off in a flash of light and an info-mercial took its place. An actress whose name Marcy couldn't recall was touting the praises of being a *real* woman with *real* curves. She stood regally in front of a wardrobe of brightly colored sweaters and blouses, advertising her latest string of fashions for full figured women, *guaranteed to take ten pounds from your appearance*. Marcy paused, entranced. The fuzzy sweaters and sleek black pants *did* make

the models look more slender than their *before* shots. "Available now at your local mall merchant," the beaming actress assured her television audience .

"David, I forgot, I have an errand to run," Marcy announced suddenly. She tugged eagerly at the laces of the last shoe.

"Errand?" he echoed, his eyebrows arched painfully on his forehead.

"Yes, *errand*. I need to run to the mall for something. There are some last minute things I have to do. Please, would you mind watching the kids for a little while?"

"Sure. I guess so." He flashed her a questioning glance.

"Thanks, just remember, no junk food for the kids, and have Mathew start his bath. And try not to mess up anything, you guys know how long it took to get this place into shape, right?" David nodded and said nothing. Marcy grabbed her purse and kissed him on one smooth cheek, ignoring the disappointed cries from Mathew and Sarah when they stuck their heads in the door to see what was keeping her.

"Hey, pick up some vanilla ice cream on your way back, would ya?" David's voice followed her out into the night.

Marcy made a straight line for the nearest mall. She strolled purposefully through its bright corridors, ignoring the tempting aromas from the cookie store as she browsed the neighboring plate glass windows of the women's clothing stores. Finally, through a jungle of endless anorexic-sized mannequins, she spotted a poster of the actress she'd just seen on television.

"But, surely you don't need the *plus* fashions. You don't have much to hide, dear," a saleswoman with her hair in a french twist insisted when she found Marcy pawing through the soft, bright colors.

"Oh, yes, I *do*," Marcy answered firmly, quickly choosing a fuchsia sweater. She pulled it from the rack and held it in front of her.

"Well, if you insist," the saleswoman remarked blandly. "Now, *that* is a wonderful color, the *fuchsia*." She held up the

sleeve of the sweater Marcy was holding. "This color has been around a long time. Used to be called *hot pink*. It can carry a redhead, a blonde or a brunette. But frankly, I prefer it on redheads," she lowered her voice and winked. "On *you*, dear, it will be a real head turner, as if it were made for you," she insisted. Marcy stared at the woman and nodded. She imagined herself parading through the airport to meet Patty, husband and kids in tow, and every man's head turning to stare in wonder when she passed by like a queen. A *tofu-queen*. She suppressed a frantic giggle.

"I'll take it," Marcy breathed excitedly. She added several pairs of the dark pants and two more sweaters in green and white to throw into the bargain. *Ready or not, here I come*. Marcy beamed and made her way back to the car with her purchases clutched tightly at her side.

The next morning came in a buzz. Marcy forced the kids through a rushed breakfast and refused to explain to them one last time why they couldn't skip school to go to the airport with her. She then made a quick inspection of the house and Edward, who'd been sulking since he'd been returned from the groomer's the day before. When David left to escort the kids to the bus stop, she ran to the bedroom and pulled the fuchsia sweater from her closet. It glowed like a beacon in the morning light while she showered, gargled and perfumed. After spraying her hair into submission she dropped the sweater carefully over her head.

"Wow," she whispered at her reflection. Not only did she look ten pounds lighter, but the color seemed to bring out a light from within her self. A stronger light. Marcy blushed and swept into the den where David stood waiting before the television set, his hands buried stiffly into the pockets of his pressed trousers.

"Do you like?" Marcy gave him a wicked smile and spun around.

"You look great, *tofuti*," David murmured.

"Sure, real *chic*, right?" She stretched out her arms and gazed down at the sweater.

"Sure. Are we ready now?"

"What? Don't you like it?" Marcy's smile fell. David still stood with his hands in his pockets, his face solemn. She felt her shoulders slump within the soft fabric.

"Of course, it's great. Are *you* happy with it?"

Marcy remained silent, afraid suddenly to speak. A surge of tears had risen and pressed against something behind her eyes, threatening to break forth with her words. The clock chimed from its place on the wall between where they stood, breaking the silence.

"Ready?" David asked, this time touching her sleeve. Marcy nodded. He wrapped her coat firmly around her shoulders and hugged her for a moment before opening the door wide.

"It's show time," he commented with awkward cheer. *Show time*, Marcy echoed silently. She stepped out into the cool sunlight and waited while David locked the door behind them.

They drove in silence to the airport. Marcy was grateful for the chaotic hum of activity made by the strangers moving in bunches around them. Her underarms began to drip as she and David stood side by side, scanning the green arrivals screen.

"Here!" David called out, pulling her close and pointing.

"Do you see it?" Before he could answer, a loud, distant screech caused them to look down the long, colorfully crowded corridor that led to baggage claim. Marcy squinted, trying to sift through the crowd that moved around her like a wave of vertigo. Suddenly, she spotted them. An overweight woman in a fuchsia sweater was gesturing wildly and pulling an equally stout, bearded man along behind her. They wove their way unevenly through the crowd toward them.

"Marcy!" the woman yelled and waved, "Marcy!"

"Patty? *Don't*?" Marcy blurted. She glanced back at David, who was also staring, a tiny smile on his lips. The woman had dropped the man's hand and was now running

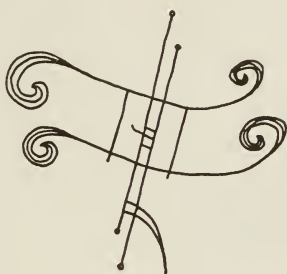
towards them. Her long black hair streamed behind her plentiful frame. Marcy looked up at David, her eyebrows raised.

"Go on," he pressed gently at the small of her back. Marcy peered back at the approaching couple.

"Patty?" Marcy gasped, taking a small step forward, then pausing for a moment before racing to her sister and wrapping her arms around her. They stood hugging and laughing until the others reached them.

"Blood friends! Fellow peas, remember?" Patty laughed.

"Oh, sister!" Marcy held Patty's face in her hands. "Welcome, sister, *welcome!*"





Cory on the Tracks
Des Purcell

The Calling:
A Personification in E Major

You are Learning; i am learning.
I know You, faceless, yearning as i yearn.
I know You by Your symbols and Your
presence in my life.

Love, boiling in my heart for You,
hurts and heals. I think of You when
i am down and grow more
depressed - or more confused - or elated.

My love for You is bigger
than i, and it scares and strengthens
my brave-weak heart.

I give all
to You, i take all from You,
i stand behind You, before You,
above You or below You,
sometimes all at once.

You are distant, yet sometimes within
my grasp. You hold me somehow
with incorporeal arms when i need
You, a beam of hope in my heart
where no hope had shone;

You are Love.

Sometimes i forget You, betray You,
lose who i am in the rush of loving You;
the details and doing.

Sometimes tears stream for joy
and sometimes for sorrow when i think of You,
Your successes or failures; both have i been,
and both will i yet be. I take more of You
into my heart every second;
with every word from book, teacher, student,
friend, foe, or stranger;
with every bird singing some vaguely
Mozartish tune before me or from the highway's
hum behind; with every dark tree against a starry
sky . . . even from myself sometimes.
I can take from You and give to You;
my calling is to share You.
You are Learning; i am learning.

Tiffanie L.C. Rogers





Sun and Moon Tree Batik
Dianna Ulm

Sleeping With a Mockingbird

Well after midnight
He comes--and she hears him
With his song that lulls her--
like a secret companion.
Lonely as she is--lonely love songs
He brings her.
Steadfast each evening--
Till morning he keeps her.
While at her side, lies a song
With less meaning--
The old purr of an old cat.
Alas greater comfort, she who has taken,
In one soulful voice;
The one real presence
In her solitude and darkness.
Even the crickets, in stillness
Have listened--
To a mockingbird's tales
of lost loves forgotten.
While at her side, her lover's silence
Shatters--Shatters her night song . . .

Donna Ferrence

A Sense of Family

Danielle Argenti

During the late winter of 1939, in a war torn Liverpool, England, a middle- aged couple prepared for bed. The wife, a staunch Catholic, modestly buttoned her nightgown as her husband, aching from a hard day's work, relaxed his stiff joints and muscles under the warm covers. The woman, Marie (pronounced with a British accent, "Mary"), threw a sheet over the mirror to cover it and completed her nightly routine. With the closet doors opened and all the dresser drawers closed, she then climbed into her side of the bed. The wind howled eerily outside and caused the sixty year old house, severely battered by Luftwaffe bombing runs, to creak like her husband's prematurely aging bones.

Marie pulled the covers up and tucked herself in as best she could, as she did every night, then tried to calm her nerves. The war had ravaged poor old England and had taken all the young men away, most never to return--like her brother Michael. *It was God's grace that kept Henry out of it*, she thought to herself and of what life would have been like without him home. Her all alone with eleven children while trying to exist on rations would have been intolerable. Her husband's snoring interrupted her thoughts. "*Henry*," she whispered at first, then "*Henry!*" again at a shrill. He moaned as she elbowed his ribs, "*For God's sake, you'll wake the dead.*" He growled something bitter about women then rolled over and immediately fell back asleep. His short, thick, bristly hair crackled against the crisp cotton sheets as he settled back into the pillow. She rolled to face Henry's sheltering back and move away from the mirror which still spooked her, even with it covered.

When Marie was young she had seen a ghost in that mirror. She saw the image of a little girl about eight years old, washing her hands in the bowl next to her bed. The specter seemed to be smiling and happy, though the experience still

frightened Marie into a frozen terror. She tried to put the mirror and the memories of her mother's old farm house out of her mind. Marie needed sleep. Tomorrow she had a load of mending to deliver so that she could collect her pittance. The meager amount she earned would help them survive until Henry's next payday. The children would be up at dawn, without fail. Hopefully, there wouldn't be any air raids tonight. After all, what could fly in this gale? She could not imagine any reason for her not to get a much needed eight hours' sleep tonight. Even the children were well, thank God, despite the raw, early spring weather. It took hours for her to unwind. Finally, she fell asleep, though a broken slumber by the occasional need to nudge Henry into silence. The wind blew harder still, hard enough to move the black-out curtains that hung at each window, which were made drafty by the almost constant shelling. She closed her eyes to the malevolent night and prayed silently for one good night's sleep--something of a luxury since the fighting began.

Marie drifted off. She dreamt of her mother's modest farm, of the animals and of the big old house, of carefree days and of her nine siblings, of Michael, once so young and full of life.

Then the scene abruptly changed. She saw May, the youngest of the family, as she was at present with her three boys in that miserable home near the docks with that wretch of a husband. May was nearly starved because there wasn't any food left in the house. Selfishly, her husband had sold the family's rations to buy ale at the corner pub. Her breasts could no longer produce enough milk to keep her six-month-old from hunger; she'd lost too much weight and recently developed a fever. The food that did come in she gave to her six-year-old, Paul, and to her four year old, Joseph. Despite the hardship, her husband was healthy enough existing on his liquid diet. May had tried to kick the louse out several times, only to be beaten until she apologized.

Marie groaned in her sleep. She watched the dream scape now centered in May's barren kitchen. Marie felt as

though she were floating on May's ceiling, watching without being able to participate, completely powerless and frustrated. May was sitting with her youngest at her empty breast; at her feet stood an old suitcase. Her other two sons sat bleary-eyed on the sofa in the next room. It was after midnight. Marie sensed that May was feeding the child one more time before venturing out on a wickedly cold night. The baby tired at her breast, unable to be completely satisfied, and drifted off. She placed the baby on the table and began to wrap him in a thick blanket. May rushed as she heard her drunken husband stumble through the door. He staggered in hours earlier than usual. He was bloodied from a bar fight and was in his usual angered delirium.

He growled, "*Just where do you think you're off to?*"

May ignored him and continued to wrap the infant. *It is useless to try and reason with him*, she thought to herself, *you'd get further with a brick wall.* "*Paul, get your coat on and dress your brother,*" she yelled from the kitchen.

Her husband lurched at her and shouted, "*You can go, but you'll not take my boys!*" She backed away from the table knowing he'd injure the baby in his drunken rage if he came after her.

Paul walked in with Joseph; "*Mum, you'll have to button his coat, I don't know how.*" Paul was afraid to enter the kitchen hearing his father's voice, but knew that sometimes Daddy would stop hitting Mummy when he walked in.

May bent to close little Joey's tight wool coat and her husband yanked her hair. As he began to swing wildly at her, she screamed, telling Paul to get the babies out of the room. Her husband missed most of the times he swung at her, though when he finally made contact, he left her slumped on the floor bleeding.

"May!" Marie shrieked from her sleep, soaked in sweat. Henry rolled over toward his wife and shook her. "*It's just a dream, Marie, easy now, just a dream.*" He hushed her and she

drifted back into her dream state. Marie could see May walking through a field covered in a foot of snow, in the midst of a fierce blizzard. She had the baby wrapped up and buttoned under her coat. Little Paul was dragging the toddler by the arm through snow that half buried Joey's small body. May had the old suitcase of her few possessions in her other hand, essentials for the baby and clothes for the boys. They walked for miles against the angry wind, falling often from exhaustion brought on by cold and malnutrition. The sky turned from black to a cruel gray as dawn's earliest lights began to illuminate the merciless storm. The toddler couldn't walk any further so May carried him, too, on her back for as long as she could. Finally, she stumbled and looked as though close to death.

Marie opened her eyes and sat up. The dream was so real that she wept. Henry woke and sat up next to her, rubbing his bristly chin and whispering, "*What is it?*" Quietly, she cried on his broad shoulder until she could bring herself to tell him of her terrible nightmare. After doing so, she felt as though a weight had been lifted. He gave her a squeeze and a peck on the cheek and offered to go make her a cup of tea. She nodded and wiped her face as he left their bedroom.

Thank God for Henry, she thought to herself. A hard man sometimes, but good to her and the children. His dry cynical wit and playing the piano could make the war and the hardship all but disappear, if only for a little while. It's a miracle that he didn't go off to war, she recalled. He'd gone to sign up and they wouldn't take him. His ear had started to bleed just ten minutes before he got there--*it bled like the dickens*--then it stopped shortly after he got home. It hadn't happened before or since--*a miracle, I say*.

Henry worked in the kitchen brewing a particularly large pot of tea. He hadn't pushed back the black-out curtains yet, but he knew the weather called for an extra cup.

While he was about to start up the stairs with their breakfast teas, he heard something he was sure was just wind at the front door. Still, he decided to check. He put the tray

down on the piano and opened the door.

May fell in. Henry caught her before she and the infant hit the floor. Tough little Paulie stood at the door holding baby brother Joey's matted hand. May was burning with fever and weeping as Paulie told Uncle Henry of their harrowing night. Though, the boy needn't have bothered. Aunt Marie had already told him.



Momma's Passion
Vickie Williams



Eagle
Robert Bell

Autobiography

I shan't wear my humanity today
This dead magic reality I will not stay
Upon this imprisoning man skin
I rip, tear, slice, and peel
My true self I do unconceal.

As two horns, piercing my head, sprout
I praise my Creator with a joyful shout
From my back two wings of the Pit unfold
Cloven goat's hooves shattering my feet
With manticore's tail my transformation be 'plete.

Nightmare and monster exult I
And in this computer world demons never die
A tomb is my bed and a skull my pillow
Shielding me from the burning, blasting sun
This eye of gods I despise and shun.

By the light of Mother Moon I sing and dance
With the dead and damned a merry prance
Darkness and mystery my eternal lot
Humans! What do I care for thee?
Reveling in my cursed, joyous devilry.

Michael Williams



Marianne II
Setona Page

Deities' Debate

I. So Sayeth the Demon

Embrace the darkness,
for it hides your tears.
Flee the light
that illuminates fears.

Hold close the shadows,
for no secrets do they hold.
They touch and caress,
and never do they scold.

Turn out the sunshine
that reflects all truth.

Shy from its beams
that chase away youth.

Kneel with your brothers,
smiling at precious death,
taking communion
from dark and warming
breath.

Not even He,
in all immaculate wealth,
can abate your fears
or save you from yourself.

II. God's Answer

I am the beacon
that leads to Life Eternal.
I am the builder
Of Satan's grand inferno.

I make no broken promises
For my sheep to hold dear,
But make your choices wisely,
For Judgment Day is near.

Choose a world of darkness
Where each corner holds true
pain,
Or turn to light and purity
Where Eternity is to gain.

Embrace the darkness, and flee
the light —
I cannot save you there.
But kiss the sunshine, and join
the fight —
Eternal love we'll share.

Never can the Prince of Dark-
ness,
With his poison tongue,
Offer more than sin to you
In his heap of dung.

Embrace my darkness
for it hides your tears.
Flee His light
that illuminates fears.

I am your beacon,
Your path to Life Eternal.
I alone can save you
From Satan's grand inferno.

Judgment Day is coming.
Are you lamb or
 Bohemian?
Life Eternal is yours and
 mine.
So sayeth the demon.

Judgment Day is coming.
Are you Bohemian or Lamb?

Do you seek the path of light?
That is what I am.

Billy Parker



Forever

Mary O'Sako

"Now, Precious. You must be still," Gregor warned absently.

Precious nodded and looked out across the lake from where she and Gregor sat hunched at the base of an ancient oak tree, shielded by a round of gardenia bushes. A ripe moon was just beginning to scale the murky landscape, and its reflection spread like the long, white bones of a hand across the water towards where they squatted. Precious jiggled her thin legs beneath her skirt, now and then plucking at a gardenia blossom and casting its pale petals out onto the water where they floated as weightless as time.

Gregor leered at her with a patronizing grin before settling his back against the mossy surface of the tree.

"You'll scare 'em all away with all those sounds you're making. Then what? We'll have to sit here most of the night with nothing to do. You know very well what a flagrant *waste* the wasting of time is. We may even be forced into turning in empty at the end, and you know how painful *that* can be!"

Precious shrugged and fiddled with a fresh sprig of flowers. She tore away a fragrant blossom and buried her face in it, then chewed thoughtfully on a petal as she stared up at the stars through curtains of Spanish moss. Across the pond the moon hung in full view, having reached a point above the tallest of the elms and maples, turning them into heaping mounds of silver. *It's perfect, of course.* It always is. She sighed to no one.

"Can you remember back, Gregor, to the last time we came here?"

"Please, keep the din to a minimum, Precious, your

voice can carry," he scolded in a deep whisper.

"I *am*." She threw him a sharp look and scooted farther out onto the cool grass to snatch up a fat earthworm, twirling it around a time-yellowed fingernail before tossing it off into the water where it landed with a perfunctory smack. Gregor shook his head in response to the smattering of bullfrogs that followed.

"Gregor? It's okay to *whisper*, isn't it? You used to whisper plenty to me. Tell me if you remember. It's important, to me anyhow. Do you remember?"

"Why *do* you ask such nonsensical questions, Precious? Why is it so important to you?"

"Not nonsensical. I can remember. I *do*. I can remember a time when we were more. . . I don't know, filled with each other, I suppose." Precious sighed wistfully and slid back towards Gregor's emaciated form, where she could see his profile cut into the darkness. A profile once so very elegant, with high forehead and creamy skin, it was now hawk-like and sallow; and when he looked at her, it was with green eyes that had faded to a watery gray. Precious smiled sadly and toyed with the grimy collar of his coat until he pushed her hand gently away.

"I *do* repulse you! I knew it. You said we'd love forever, no matter what. You once even said you'd kiss my wrinkles when I got them." She folded her arms tightly.

"Precious, what am I to do? You always start out like this, so restless. Can we not enjoy the evening in peace? Why must I constantly remind you of how things are and will be, while you dredge up things that are no more? Be patient and be still, you know you *must* keep still if you are to come with me. You know how important this is," he finished solemnly. His features softened at her pouty countenance, "Come now, Precious, it won't be much longer now. I know how deep the restlessness lies, believe me. But the full moon always brings them, we *both* just have to be patient." He patted her knee roughly and looked back out at the water. Precious gave him a

small perfunctory smile and folded her hands loosely in her lap.

A couple emerged from the shadow of trees across the lake and strolled slowly along the path that led around its circumference. They stopped suddenly and the man pulled his companion closer until their faces met and became one in the half-light. Precious raised her fingers to her own parched lips and watched them closely until they finally parted and turned away to walk off across the field, hand in hand. She leaned heavily against Gregor.

"Gregor?"

"Yes?"

"Don't you miss it?"

"Miss *what*?" he sighed, suppressing a grimace.

"Don't you miss those deep kisses we used to share? So lovely, like what *they* were just doing," she nodded towards the path the couple had taken.

"What? We aren't like them anymore."

"You know what I mean. The way we used to kiss made me feel. . ."

"What?"

"Pretty! It made me feel *pretty*," she finished, brushing away an insect that was feeling its way up the length of her sleeve.

"*Pretty*?"

"Oh, never mind, you old ogre!" Precious crawled a short distance away. She tugged at the front of her skirt and a large piece of the hem gave way and fluttered to the ground. She picked up the mildewed fragment and held it in front of her. *Pink, I can remember pink.* She closed her eyes tightly and pulled from the dank recesses of her memory the essence of an evening. *A long ago evening like this one, the night was fresh, it was early June. Oh and the dress, my beautiful pink dress, it fit so well. . .and Gregor, how his eyes did light in his face when he saw me move across the lawn towards him. And I was, yes, I was pretty. . .*

The faint crunching sound of approaching footsteps

drifted easily to them through the still air. Gregor leaned forward, Precious tensed. It was a young man, hands in pockets, whistling a vaguely familiar tune. *Please go away, not yet, not yet. I'm not ready to leave yet. Don't let him near here, leave us alone a little longer, please.* Precious counted her breaths silently. *One, two, three, four.* The young man reached the park bench a mere hundred yards from where they sat. He turned there, where the path forked, and headed up the slope towards the parking area.

Four, he left on the count of four, a good solid number, a good omen. But that song he was whistling, I know a song like that, I know it. . . what was it, oh something, something wonderful! Precious propped her chin in her hand and shut her eyes once more.

A phantom orchestra played to her with haunting familiarity, softly titillating with its repetition of the piece until her mind retrieved firmly the words that went with it. *"Heaven, I'm in heaven, and my heart beats so that I can hardly speak; I seem to find the happiness I seek, when we're out together dancing cheek to cheek. . ."*

It was Gregor and she, dancing in the Blue Pelican Ball Room, where they waltzed and did the *Charleston* for hours on end. That had been so very long ago, but it came to her like it was yesterday. Gregor had been so debonair in his tuxedo with his dark hair brushed back and his eyes green and blazing. She'd felt as light as a rose petal moving within his iron embrace, and her long pink skirt had swished delightfully around her ankles. So completely and utterly happy they'd felt that night, so filled with each other that they had vowed to live in each other's sight forever.

"Forever." Precious savored the word as it tumbled from her lips and dissolved into the atmosphere. She opened her eyes to the quiet pressure of bone-hard fingers on her shoulder.

"Precious?"

"HMMMM."

"Precious, what are you doing?"

"Oh, Gregor. I was just thinking backwards."

"Thinking backwards?"

"Reminiscing. About how we'd danced all night long at the *Blue Pelican Ball Room*? Oh, to *be* like *that* again, to feel like *that*!"

"You mean you were *dreaming*? Now?" his voice flattened.

Precious nodded and returned hesitantly to his side where she lay her head on his shoulder. Gregor stiffened. A dog barked from some distant back yard and was immediately silenced by the incoherent command of its master.

"You were supremely handsome in your black suit. It made your eyes look so green, you know, like deep emerald pools."

"Please. Don't do this, Precious. The time, don't forget the time."

"No, I haven't. But you have," she commented softly. She reached with a trembling hand and touched his cheek before sitting up and facing away from him. A bat's erratic flight caught their attention as it squeaked above their heads. It dove and ricocheted from tree to tree as if seeking escape from its self-induced flight plan.

"*Deep emerald pools, eh?*"

"Oh, certainly, love." She stretched and threw him a smoldering look. "Why else do you think I've stayed *here* at your side for so long, my *ogre*?"

They looked at each other and laughed. It was a rusty sound, like the opening of a long abandoned gate. Afterwards they sat in silence for long while, aware of the distant drone of traffic from the new freeway, and the occasional buzz of mosquitoes as they passed by, searching for warm flesh to feed upon.

The loud slam of a car door accompanied by the happy shout of a child from across the entranceway to the park caused both Gregor and Precious to blink.

"Do you ever think we may have had *that*, Gregor? Before, you know?"

“Had what?”

“You mean to say you never saw us with a child, a family?”

“Precious, I saw only our lives! You are my family, and there was only *one* choice for us and you know this. We *could* have been sedentary and mundane, resting our brittle bones on some pastel lawn furniture in a place like Boca Raton with the rest of the decaying, sipping watered drinks and chasing them with medicines for this and that, and all the time wondering where our lives went. Our short, little lives. I mean, why rehash all of this *now*, all this melancholy *rot* on *this*, our sole night out of the year?” His voice cut deeply through the warm air like the cool blade of a razor.

Precious bowed her head. A small sob escaped her. She touched the back of one gnarled hand to her eye; it came back dry. She allowed the song to creep back into her conscious. She felt the words form in her throat, and her vocal chords, long rusted from disuse, picked them up. “Heaven, I’m in heaven, and my heart beats so. . .” the words become lost in the dry weeping that choked her. She stopped and covered her face with both hands.

Gregor moved close and placed an arm around her shoulders and for awhile Precious’ dwindling cries were echoed only by the crickets. She squeezed Gregor’s hand as she fought silently for control.

Footsteps were borne once again from across the lake. Gregor released Precious’ hand slowly and leaned forward to wait. Closer they came. Another couple, a young man and woman, strolled into the light. *Pink, she’s wearing pink.* Precious felt the ache in her dissolve into something hard as she watched them. They did not take the turn. On they came, arm in arm, speaking in the gentle, considerate tones of those young to each other. When they neared the oak tree, Gregor gave the nod.

The couple neither saw nor heard what came at them from the bushes beside the lake. They were taken in the most tender of moments as they gazed into each other’s eyes, with-

out a single thought or reflex of fear. Gregor took the woman, Precious the man. They drug their prey through the bushes and into a secluded clearing, where they deftly peeled the clothing from the carcasses and lay these items carefully aside before falling to their feed. Wet, cracking sounds pervaded the night.

Precious, always the first to finish, stood and waited for Gregor. "Come here," she commanded softly from the renewed lush of her lips. Gregor stepped across the deep stain on the grass that the elements would soon wear away and stooped, smiling indulgently while he allowed her to wipe his face clean and brush the black hair from his now smooth forehead. They undressed and shredded what was left of their moldering garments, scattering the fistful of scraps into the wind before donning the fresher attire. Precious and Gregor faced each other, resplendent in the garb of the already forgotten.

"Dance, my sweet?" Gregor murmured, bowing low beneath a moon that was taking its last turn in the sky to begin its journey west. Precious nodded and curtsied before stepping within the circle of his arms, where she savored the strength and fluidity in their movements. *Pink, I just knew it'd be Pink*, she thought happily as the girl's skirt moved with her.

They danced around the field, first in a *waltz* and then a *fox-trot*. Precious gazed into Gregor's deep green eyes and forgot all else. There was no hunger, nor illness, nor death. *Forever and ever and ever*. She closed her eyes and held onto him, allowing him to lead her through graceful swirls and dips over the night-cooled grass. They moved so swiftly that they became a blur no mortal eye could comprehend, a cool breeze on the dead calm of a late summer night.

Gregor and Precious danced until the pink edge of dawn slit the horizon. Precious froze and stared into it, until Gregor gently pried her fingers from his shoulder and led her back toward the lake. A tear trickled down her cheek and she caught it with her hand and held it aloft. It shimmered like a diamond from her finger before dripping onto her waiting tongue. *A single tear, a single drop of salt for our anniversary.*

She trailed slowly after Gregor, pausing when a shiny pink something caught her eye. The girl's pocket book still lay in the damp grass. Precious stooped and picked it up, savoring the smoothness of the leather before opening it. Inside she found a wallet, a hairbrush and a small silver tube. She plucked the tube from the purse and let the rest fall forgotten to the ground. Twisting the tube slowly, a small, pink stick of lip color appeared.

"Pink," she sighed, closing the tube carefully and holding it to her bosom. She moved across the grass to where Gregor waited, his eyes glinting with the flame of emeralds. He embraced her and they headed out through the park and across the still sleeping town common until they came to a gravel road that led through tall iron gates. They entered and walked up the path that cut through the center of the cemetery, to the ivy covered, stone building that waited for them there. The damp, moldy smell of the crypt that lay within greeted them as they stood poised to cross the threshold and into the perpetual dark. Precious gripped his arm.

"Once more, Gregor?"

He nodded slowly. Precious squeezed his hand between hers and stared defiantly into the ever reddening sky.

"*Now*, Gregor. Kiss me *now*."

"We can't, Precious."

"Please, just this once?" she breathed, pressing herself closer.

He glanced up at the swelling clouds of the coming day before stooping forward and kissing her, pushing his lips deeply into hers, abruptly shoving her away as the hunger swelled in them. Precious smiled sadly and touched her lips.

"Forever?"

"Forever." He smiled back and held out his hand, "come, Precious." He led her inside, sealing the doors against the daylight behind them.

These Four Walls

Solitaire. Bare. Silent.

Nothing but an occasional dark, gray scruff

On the creamy white walls and me.

They will cover them with fresh new paint.

They will fill the holes that were used to hang

My mirrors, curtains, and frames.

They will make it look as if nobody

Lived here.

Brand new.

If these four walls could speak

What would they say?

Would they laugh at the way I acted out

My dreams and fantasies?

Would they tell of the lonely, insecure girl

Who stared out the window

Wishing someone would love her

Enough to rescue her?

Would they speak of the time

I blindly invited poisonous love inside?

Inside the room of my soul

That was one time alive?

Would they say how many nights

I wept on my knees, on the chilled wooden floor?

Would they tell about how I stood

In front of the long, narrow mirror

To criticize my physical flaws?

These four walls have witnessed
Bits and pieces of my being.
They have seen and heard
The depths of the darkest, profound secrets.
Are they eager for the next one
To occupy the space, to take my place?
Exactly how many coats of fresh paint
Have they endured, anyways?
I will never know.
If these four walls could speak
What would they say?

Michelle Ortiz



Mating
Christopher K. Daly

Trash: A Lesson in Seduction

Billy Parker

The grey-tarnished truck lumbered through street after street, picking up the world's refuse at a glance. But was that all the streets held? Mere refuse? Darwin didn't think so. The day he applied for his job as a garbage man, he went to the office, or the cubicle that poorly imitated one, what with the water cooler and all, and immediately met the secretary who asked if he was there for the job of sanitary engineer. Darwin hated glamour. He saw his job for its reality, garbage collector. Still, he said yes and recited his vital statistics as if in the Army. Darwin, Peter G. 5'11". 163 pounds. Social Security, 254-64-2665. Truck license, same. That concluded his interview. Hired. Garbage man. Usually, the city placed two men to a truck, but Darwin was stuck alone. His partner was down with the flu or some such ailment. He wouldn't be back for at least two weeks, and with the personnel shortage, there were no extra partners to be had. Just as well. Darwin preferred working alone. He could get closer to his work. Salvaging the broken treasures of others brought him great joy. Occasionally, he learned about his customers, as he liked to call them. Little Rusty got a bad report from school, but his mom never knew. Mr. Danfield got lingerie catalogs in the mail. Dirty old bastard. Darwin's salvaging was how he came to love Marissa. She was unknowingly the love of Darwin's life.

The cans yielded more than the usual wonders on that particular day. Darwin lifted a lid to reveal a letter. He smelled the fine perfume, even over the pungent stench of garbage. He opened the sealed pink envelope, careful not to damage its contents. Coaxing the paper from its resting place, he read.

My love, I have been watching you. Your walk, with its side-to-side sway, your hair blowing in the morning

breeze, your sleepy yawn as you pass my house every day. I love to see your muscles, perfect working machines, flexing, dripping with the dew of your daily toiling. I have fallen in love with you, my dear. You make my heart flutter. I love you and will always be—
Yours, Marissa

Darwin was stunned. Could it really be him she was after? Or was she too scared to give her letter to its intended recipient? He carefully replaced the letter as he walked back to the truck. Was he Marissa's lover? And if he was, which house was hers? It could be any one of four. If only he knew.

After a long night of thinking, Darwin woke to a rainy day and prepared himself for work. A quick breakfast, and he was out the door. As Darwin drove his route, he daydreamed of ways he could see his beloved Marissa, but no idea seemed worthwhile. Presently, though, he was in front of her cans. Darwin again wondered which of the houses was hers. Was she watching him now? He glanced at each house, ready to look away if he saw anyone looking back. There was not, so Darwin raided the cans. Finding another note, he dumped the rest and got into the truck. Again he coaxed the words of adoration from within the walls of the envelope.

My dear, I have learned your name. Peter. It is such a wonderful name. How I should love to call it out again and again. I am going to my mother's today, and I will not see you, but write me a response. Leave it under the can. I so look forward to your words, Peter.
Yours, Marissa

Darwin was ecstatic. It really was him she loved. The rest of the day, Darwin thought and thought. Finally, he decided to do the first drastic act in his life. He took up a pen and began writing.

Marissa, though I haven't seen you, I am in love with

you. I dream about you at night. I wonder what you look like. I look forward to your perfumed, pink envelope. I slowly open it and drink in every word. I must see you, Marissa. I have to see the woman who makes me feel this way. Tell me which house is yours. I will come to see you, and we can be together. I hope to see you soon, Marissa.

Peter

As soon as Darwin finished his letter, he drove over and left it exactly where Marissa had instructed, under the can. Driving home, he thought about what morning would bring. For the first time in years, Darwin anticipated the next day. With dawn came invigoration and courage. Darwin got ready and rushed out to work. He didn't even bother with the treasures of others. Today he wanted a treasure of his own. When he came to the can, he could scarcely open it. Finding the prettier-than-usual pink envelope, he shakily removed the message.

Peter, My house is the red brick. Come tonight to the back door. Knock three times. I'll be waiting.

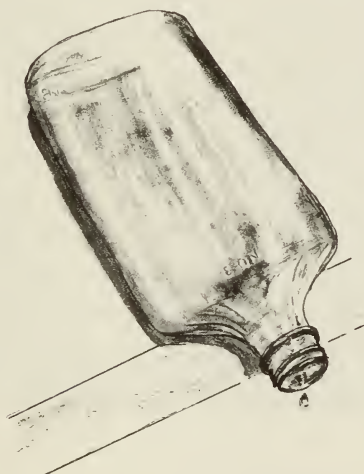
Love, Marissa

Darwin jumped about as he returned to the truck, almost forgetting to empty the can. After rushing home from work, Darwin immediately began to get ready for his evening. He took his time to make sure everything was exactly right. First, a shower. Just enough hot water to feel good. Darwin never was one for too much hot water. Next, after carefully drying his wet limbs, Darwin shaved. He expertly agitated the brush to form a pearly white foam. Closing his eyes, he lathered his face, knowing every inch by feel. His skin tingled as the thick foam penetrated his pores. Darwin slowly picked up his father's gift to him sixteen years ago — a silver handled razor. He palmed it as if he were shaking an old friend's hand. The newly sharpened blade felt ever so good as it removed the

stubble from Darwin's right cheek. Right was always first. Then left. Finally, the chin. Last, the upper lip. Darwin carefully rinsed the tool in the running water. Then he blotted his clean shaven face. He enjoyed the smoothness. He hoped Marissa would as well. An hour later, Darwin was at Marissa's doorstep. He rapped three times. Knock. Knock. Knock. Marissa opened the door. She was stunning, with her fitted dress and six inch heels. Darwin could but stare as she sashayed through the dim light toward him. Saying nothing, she pulled him inside, meeting him with a kiss that almost stopped his heart. Marissa smiled as she led him to the bedroom.

The next morning, Darwin awoke with the strength only a night like the last could bring, to find a pink envelope on the pillow. He read.

Be gone by noon. My husband returns at one. I can never see you again. It's amazing what treasures one finds in the trash, isn't it, Peter?



Loneliness
Nick Bacich

National Geographic

I snip outline of bright objects.
The artist in me selects, places.
Viewer will put it all together.
The colorful clutter collects.
Shadow covers sloping mountains.
Rusty tractor remains behind.
Young boy with flowers is snubbed.
The girl has lips pursed tight.
Old man's skin is weather beaten,
He smiles beside black, Model-T.
Robed priest blesses scene of viewer
She faces wall of oil paintings.
Thin child peers beneath a basket.
He stands before fortress and blue whale.
The boy jumps over banister.
Parents watch, see skate board in his hand.
Grandmother squinches girl's pink cheeks.
She squeezes child in crook of her arm.
Behind them is large broken egg shell.
The chicken's foot is large and splayed.

Rachel Brown



Time Flying
Phillip Kandel

The Spring

Julie Barfield

Did you know that if aphids had no predators and an unlimited food supply, they would cover the earth, several miles thick in just one summer? It's an interesting fact I picked up from, but no, I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me start from the beginning.

There's a table in my garden, a green, wrought-iron table with surprisingly comfortable chairs to match. I got it for a song at an estate sale last winter.

That table started everything. Before I had it, I lived inside. I'd look out at the same shrubs around the house, legacies of a former owner, and I'd turn back to the television or the dishes or whatever was waiting for me indoors.

But after I bought it, things started to happen. I decided I'd enjoy sitting at it more if I had a little privacy from the bordering road; up went the wooden fence. I thought some vines might be nicer to look at than a fence, so in came the Honeysuckle. Roses followed, then Dahlias, Larkspur, Delphinium, Columbines, Sweet William, Summer Phlox, and a virtual stampede of garden plants, tools, soil, and planters.

It was a pretty extensive garden, especially for someone with no experience beyond a patch of Shasta daisies and Marigolds in childhood, but I loved it. When I had a spare hour, it was spent preparing the soil, weeding, planning, planting, watering, pruning. Nothing could stop me; I had found a purpose.

From then on, I kept my curtains open whenever I was inside. I filled the house with vases of cut flowers, and every heavy book was a flower press. The outdoors had become familiar and inviting to me. I savored the cool softness of rich soil crumbling in my hands, the gentle, airy fragrances of flowers and of leaves--nothing like potpourri--and the cheerful banter of bird calls floating through the air.

My garden had begun beautifully. The plants were thriving, budding, blossoming, rewarding me for my devotion,

thrilling me with their variety and brilliance. I spent whole days at my table, watching the transformations and contemplating the richness of my paradise.

Then one day, having noticed an odd color on one of the English Roses, I stepped over to take a closer look. The heavy round bud, normally an even, buttery yellow, was splotted with red marks and black circles. I was appalled. Looking into the garden, I saw an abundance of healthy plants, but here and there, in inconspicuous spots, there were frayed leaves, nibbled petals, inexplicable movements. I couldn't tell how many or what kind they were, but I knew my fragile garden was surrounded by--bugs.

I went to the toolshed for my clippers and used them to lop off all the infested flowers I could find. Another Rose, a Peony bud, even the leaves of a Butterfly Bush. I squashed them all thoroughly, as much for effect as to kill the eggs inside.

In the weeks that followed, there were more and more bug-related problems. The one "useful" plant I had tried, a simple tomato, had been attacked and all its fruit consumed or ruined. The Irises got borers; aphids came out of nowhere to feast on the best of my Roses; caterpillars were everywhere. I was desperate.

I resolved to buy a poison and douse the whole yard with it. I went to the store, headed toward the aisle I had always avoided, took a deep breath, and plunged in. "Harmful to fish and wildlife," "May be harmful to birds, fish, and other wildlife," "Toxic to fish, waterfowl, and other wildlife," all the containers proclaimed. The air I was trying not to breathe on that aisle backed up their claims. I left the store empty-handed, resigned.

For days after that, I sat at my table and stared into the garden, watching the gruesome little creatures devour my joy as they crawled, hopped, and flew through the paradise that used to be mine. Horror followed resignation, and I began to shudder at their stiff-jointed acrobatics and their fluid dances, watching frozen as their tiny relentless mouths clamped tight

to the flowers, drinking the life that had enriched mine. The disproportionately large eyes peered out at me in dreams, and the light, stiff legs crawled over me as I lay inert, sleeping. Tiny winged things started flying into my mouth, and when I awoke, I spent half an hour brushing my teeth.

Over the sound of running water and my frantic gargling, I heard one morning on the radio that the county extension service was offering a class in organic pest control. I called immediately to register and counted the days till it started. The dreams got worse, as though the little monsters knew my plan and were taking their vengeance early. But they couldn't scare me out of it; that Tuesday afternoon, the first day of class, I was there early, waiting by the door, anxious to begin.

"Here for the bug class?" asked a voice over my shoulder.

"Yes," I said, turning to see who spoke. It was a man, standing comfortably beside me, holding a notebook under one arm and smiling pleasantly.

"I guess we're a little early. I'm Karl Blake." He held out his hand.

I took it and answered, "Charlotte."

"Just Charlotte?" he asked, but before I had time to answer, the instructor appeared and began to jabber at us. He unlocked the door to the classroom and let us in. More students followed, and in a few moments we were all assembled at a large table in the middle of the room.

The instructor called the roll. Eight people of the nine who had registered were present. He decided to begin. First, he had us tell how long we had been gardening. I was one of the newest at it, not surprisingly, but no one seemed to mind. Then he asked about specific crops or flowers and our individual problems with bugs. I told my story, all but the nightmares. Every time I looked up, it seemed Karl was looking over at me. I don't mean rudely, just attentively, almost like, well, attentively.

About ten minutes into class, the door opened. We all

looked around and saw a huge pair of eyes blinking back.

"Is this the organic gardening class?" It was a thin, reedy voice, for all the world like a cricket. The instructor didn't seem to notice. He invited her in.

"Livia Olson?" he asked, looking at his roll.

"Liv," she replied and slid into the empty chair at the end.

The class was two hours long, with a ten minute break in the middle. As the break began and the group was scattering in search of vending machines and bathrooms, I heard that odd high voice behind me, spoken in my direction.

"Did you know that if aphids had no predators and an unlimited food supply, they would cover the earth, several miles thick, in just one summer?" She'd said it for effect, and successfully, too. As gardeners, we were all properly horrified by the thought of aphid-takeover. The strange thing about Liv, though, as I began to discover, was that you never knew which side she was rooting for.

I turned toward her, facing the huge, round eyes nestled in the triangle of yellow skin that was her face. If it weren't for the thick black hair that flowed so heavy and mammalian from her scalp, she might have been mistaken for a human-sized bug. I stood there, wondering how to answer her comment, when Karl came to my side with a smile. He introduced himself to Liv, taking her hand, and helped me over my awkwardness by engaging her in garden small-talk.

When the class was over that night, I hoped for a chance to talk to Karl alone again, but charming young men are universally appreciated, and he was chatting with everyone. I turned to leave and started down the hall. Footsteps followed, but they clicked instead of treading.

"Charlotte."

I shuddered. It was that creepy bug-woman.

The clicking came quicker, and she was beside me.

"Oh, hi," I said, pretending I hadn't heard her before.

"Hi. It is Charlotte, isn't it?"

"Yes, why?"

"Oh, I just said your name. You must not have heard."

"Oh." Creepier and creepier. What did she want?

We left the building and headed for the parking lot.

"I was a little late tonight. What did I miss?"

"Oh, just introductions. And we talked about our individual problems with bugs."

"The next class is Thursday, right?"

"Mm-hm," I nodded. We were at my car. Say good night, Gracie.

"Oh, you must be in a hurry. Well, I'll see you Thursday."

"Okay, bye." I unlocked the door. She was still standing there. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight." Then, as an afterthought, she added, "Sleep tight; don't let the bed bugs bite!" She laughed at her little joke and finally walked away. Spooky.

On Thursday, I was early again and waited in the hall for class to start. Mr. Barnes, the instructor, arrived first and after him, Liv, who sat beside me at the table. She had more bizarre information to offer about the ambitions and abilities of the insect world--apparently, collecting bug statistics was a hobby of hers. She seemed pretty wrapped up in things most people would rather not think about and offered a statement about the mating habits of beetles with a look most people assume when discussing weird couples at the end of the bar.

I must have flinched, because she stopped in mid-sentence. Her triangular head nodded a little, swiveling so that my face was centered between her eyes.

"Am I making you uncomfortable, Charlotte?"

"What do you mean, because I don't like bugs?"

"No, it's not that. Most people don't like them, but you seem to have quite a horror of them." She blinked her eyes several times, rhythmically. They were really sort of hypnotic, her eyes.

"Charlotte?"

"Well, I do get disgusted," I admitted. Then I added,

without really believing it, "But it's all part of gardening; I can take it."

"Well," she said, clamping and unclamping her tiny mouth, "that's how I chose the field. I'm studying to be an entomologist. When I was little, I had all sorts of insect phobias; sometimes they'd even get into my dreams." She combed at her thick hair with the fingers of her right hand, stopping half-way down to tug at a knot. "So, I tried to study the fears away, analyze them to death as it were." Here she tittered drunkenly. "It's worked pretty well."

I didn't know if I agreed, so I kept silent. The rest of the class started to arrive, and finally Karl was there, sitting just across from me. In class that day, we discussed making excursions to the individual gardens. Karl's place was first on the list.

During the break, he approached me, or us, I should say, since Liv was flitting around me like a gnat. Karl looked so handsome with his dark wavy hair and his warm eyes. Better every time I saw him. Why couldn't Liv take a hint and leave us alone? He was more polite than I could manage to be. He went out of his way to involve her in the conversation, draw her out. If his kindness was motivated by an impression that she was my friend, it was wasted effort, but maybe he was just raised better than I was.

By the time the class resumed, I was really annoyed. Instead of slipping away to pester some other group, Liv had dominated the conversation, filling my ears with her silvery hum and testing the limits of my patience. She had even managed to engage Karl in what seemed like genuine conversation. They got on topics that went beyond mere politeness. Seems she knew an old girlfriend of his; I lost interest in the chatter. The break ended, and I went back to my seat, glad to hear the bustling of the group reclaiming their seats instead of the shrill voice that was Liv's. She glided smoothly back to her chair with movements that had a creepy, silent kind of grace to them.

The day came to begin the garden tours. Karl met us at

the classroom, and we followed in our cars as he led the way to his garden. It was only a few miles away, the Blake Estate, the closest thing in town to a mansion. So my Karl was one of those Blakes, the wealthy, powerful family that had practically invented Brookston. No matter; he had never set himself apart from the others out of misplaced pride. He was still his charming, handsome self.

When I arrived with Liv in tow (she'd invited herself to ride with me), Karl was greeting the others. When we were all assembled, he led the way to the kitchen garden.

It was really striking. He said that when he'd started working on it, six years ago, it had been pretty run down. No one had done much to it beyond weeding for some time. He had practically redone everything, pulling up the worn-out plants, choosing some new colors to freshen it up, and making a more harmonious composition. Mr. Barnes applauded the design and mentioned a few things Karl could do to inhibit the bugs that had been feasting on his Thyme.

We moved on toward the next stop, the informal perennial borders. As we walked along the cut stone path, someone pointed out the yellow flowers edging our way. They were Primroses, a sort of joke, Karl explained.

The borders were even more luxuriously planted than the kitchen garden. They followed a long stretch of the path, from sunlight to shade. The designs must have been difficult--there was a rather steep slope--but the effect was dazzling. Magnificent blue Delphinium and creamy Hollyhocks formed the backbone of the garden, while Rosebushes brimming with heavy red blossoms filled the center for a striking contrast. Baby's Breath and Blue Wonder spilled over the walk in alternating clumps along the front, and the rest was filled in with Porterweed, Gerber daisies, Salvias, and multitudes of other flowers. The shady end of the garden was bright with Strawberry Foxglove and diamond white Astilbe lining the background and Hostas. Cushion Spurge, and even midget Calla Lilies to the fore. It was remarkable, and Karl's animated

voice in describing his efforts showed the strength of his attachment to it.

A man after my own heart.

For me, it was a difficult though a beautiful day. I had to keep reminding myself that all this wasn't mine; I'd be leaving along with the other guests soon. Even "guests" was saying a little much; it was just a class, but something about Karl was so inviting and comfortable. I didn't want to leave.

But the day was ending. The warm breeze slowed, stilled, and the light was changing from a clear white to a muddled orange. Mr. Barnes informed Karl that using copper stakes for the Hostas would keep snails away, and then he dismissed the class. We turned as a group and headed back down the yellow-lined path. I saw that Karl and Liv were discussing something up ahead, but I couldn't hear what--the path was only wide enough for two.

We all said goodbye to Karl and began to leave. I couldn't stay to chat, because I had Liv to cart home, and, besides, my car was behind Mr. Barnes'. We pulled out of the driveway in silence, and for a moment, I thought I'd get to spend the whole trip in delicious contemplation, but then Liv started in on me.

"I'm so glad I rode with you; otherwise, I wouldn't have known how to get away."

What an odd thing to say.

"Oh, that's all right." I assumed she was thanking me.

She wasn't finished. Her long fingers strummed unconsciously on the thin, flat purse across her lap. The movement made me shudder. Her head was rocking on her neck, a little like it wasn't securely attached. I wished her away, but her tiny, hard mouth began to open and she spoke again.

"I suppose I should tell him to stop calling me. I just don't want this class to become unpleasant."

Whatever was she talking about?

"Whatever are you talking about?" I asked.

"Karl."

My head spun toward her involuntarily. I expected to

see her glaring at me with those huge insect eyes of hers, maybe even smiling cruelly at the bewildered look on my face. But no. She was sitting, rather like an ordinary person, with her eyes directed at her shoes in silent thought.

I turned back to the road. Surely she was joking. But Liv didn't know how to joke. He was calling her? HE was calling HER? It didn't make sense. What did they have in common? He likes plants; she likes bugs.

"Are you serious?" I asked, trying not to sound too incredulous or upset. "Karl's been calling you?"

"Yes. But I'm far too busy to see anyone. Besides, he's not my type."

Oh, and what is your type? Six legged? How could Karl like this insect of a woman who didn't even have the sense to appreciate him?

My beautiful day was never beautiful at all. It had all been an illusion.

We got to Liv's apartment, and I pulled up in silence, waiting for her to get out.

"Thank you for the ride, Charlotte. Would you like to come in for a while?"

"I thought you were too busy to see anyone." God, that sounded bitter.

"Well, there's seeing and then there's seeing. Hey, have you seen The Swarm?"

"What?"

"You know, the movie about killer bees. I've got it on tape."

"No. Listen, Liv, I really have to go."

"Okay. I'll see you next week at my garden."

"Mm-hm."

I drove home quickly and almost ran to my garden when I was there. I sat at the table and stared unseeing into the plants. I had been getting a little too involved in my Karl fantasies. I needed to sort out my thoughts.

Hadn't he singled me out for attention? Hadn't he sought me out during our spare time? Hadn't he--But no, Liv

had been with me. Had she been waiting for him to come over, using me as bait? Or had he been coming to--unthinkable! But, maybe he had been coming over to talk to her. Maybe I was the one who was in the way.

There was a rustling of leaves, and I looked up. There before me, perched on the tip of a late-blooming Columbine, was a pair of great yellow eyes, blinking into mine. There were cruel pincers before its mouth and elaborately jointed legs folded under its segmented body. It was ready to spring towards me. I was powerless in its gaze. I felt that it knew me, or knew at least what I was, an obstacle to its ambition. I stayed seated, but leaned further back in my chair, distancing my face from the creature. Surely it couldn't jump that far.

I stared into its eyes, which bobbed a little as the plant moved in a sudden breeze. There was a movement at the creature's back, and suddenly, wings unfolded. It zoomed towards my face as though it were gliding on a string. My paralysis was over. I ran frantically, foolishly into the house, locking the door behind me.

I didn't go outside at all the next day. I even skipped class so I wouldn't have to see Liv's garden. I went outside once to turn on the sprinkler, and once again to turn it off, but I didn't go near the garden.

By the time the class met again, I couldn't stay away. I had to find out where I stood. I was a little late, but everyone was in the parking lot when I arrived.

"Oh, good, I'm glad you're here," said Mr. Barnes, as I walked toward the group. "We're just on our way to see Liv's garden."

"Oh?" I said. "I thought, I thought I had missed that."

"No, you're in luck. It looked a little overcast last time, so we stayed inside."

I tried to think of something polite to say, but it didn't matter; the class was forming its little caravan. I got back into my car and joined the parade. In about fifteen minutes we had arrived at the university test gardens, where Liv had a plot of her own. I had considered turning off and going back home,

but I didn't want to offend Mr. Barnes.

Liv had warned us not to expect too much, but when I finally saw it, I began to consider even the word "garden" as an exaggeration. It was more like a bed, about five feet by ten feet, filled in with various plants in no particular order. Red Roses butted heads with a pink and yellow Peonies. Taller flowers covered the front of the bed, hiding the shorter ones behind them from view. Apparently, Liv functioned without a sense of composition, a larger picture. I supposed spending most of your waking hours contemplating creatures smaller than your thumbnail could have that effect, but still it seemed strange. Her little shed, which was filled with dried bugs pinned onto papers and live bugs staring angrily out of their tiny cages, almost made me feel pity. As we inspected the place and commented on the variety of insects she had at her disposal to study, she stood still, her long, delicate fingers twisting a bit of string on the wooden table, looking something like a bug goddess as she stared vacantly past her thralls.

At the end of the day, when we were leaving, I observed Karl closely, but didn't attempt to approach him. Karl said "Goodbye, Livia. See you next week."

As he spoke, Liv's pupils seemed to dilate and her head swiveled them toward him. The first tinge of red I had ever seen on her cheeks appeared then. It reminded me of something out of a dream.

I was leaving, too, and trying to shake off the creepy feeling that her looks and her voice and her bugs gave me when I was accosted by her trilling.

"Charlotte, wait a minute."

"I need to go, Liv."

"Oh, I just wanted to say something. It's about Karl."

"Oh?" I said, suddenly interested. It sounded like a confession. I'd wondered if Karl had invited us both to stay that day and if Liv had declined for both of us. Maybe she was ashamed and wanted to apologize.

"Well, the last time I saw you, I said some pretty unkind things."

"Oh?"

"I mean about Karl. But I really don't think badly about him, not really at all." Again with the pink cheeks.

I couldn't tell what she was getting at, but then she turned those big eyes on me, blinking at me like, like I was an obstacle to her ambition.

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked.

"I just thought you'd like to know," said her small clamping mouth, but it seemed there was something more behind it.

I left.

I didn't go back to class again.

One day that fall I saw an article in the Brookston Post announcing the engagement of Livia Olson to Karl Blake. I had a dream that night about Liv's garden. Her nervous fingers had been engaged in shredding one of my English Roses instead of twisting about a bit of old string. I had stared at the motions in a trance and, when I heard Karl's voice saying, "Goodbye, Livia. See you next week," something glistened at her hands. The golden color I had thought was my Rose had become a shining circle on one of those long delicate fingers, and beautiful wings had jutted suddenly out of her back. I stood frozen, staring in awe.

"Am I making you uncomfortable, Charlotte?" came the thin, trilling voice. I raised my eyes to hers and she leapt up into the air flying toward my open mouth, mesmerizing me with her huge eyes. I woke up screaming, terrified, unable to relax.

The winter was a difficult time, with no flowers to help me through. But it's spring now.

Yes, it's spring now, and there are more aphids than ever on my roses.



Dawn's Dew
Vickie Williams

E'la

At the foot of blue mountains cold in the sun
In the breast of her hills a river does wind
From her hard black bones white waters are spun
Just like the wind it's not cruel or kind

Where emeralds can bleed and weep with the sky
It's here I saw E'la child of the wood
The blue and green water flowed in her eyes
Wat'ry diamond bracelets danced where she stood.

The tears of the mountain shed from the snow
The spirit was waiting, jaws opened wide
To pull me down to boiling froth below
With you my sweet E'la there by my side

If mountains could cry if mountains could pray
No one beats the river is all she'd say

Jim Sheehan



Cloud Study #46

Setona Page



